



# Georges Simenon

## The Mahé Circle





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THE MAHÉ CIRCLE

*Translated by Siân Reynolds*



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

*The Mahé Circle*, completed in Spring 1944 and previously unpublished in English, is set on the island of Porquerolles, where Simenon had spent considerable time in the preceding years.

*For Tigy, in remembrance of Saint-Mesmin*

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## 1. The Doctor Versus the Péquois

He was frowning. Perhaps, like a schoolboy, he was poking out the tip of his tongue? Lips set, a sulky expression on his face, he was snatching glimpses at Gène, trying to imitate his movements as closely as possible.

But it was no good: something was wrong, because the result wasn't the same. He was honest enough to recognize this, and obstinate enough to contain his impatience. His hand was trailing outside the boat, like Gène's, no more or less, quite relaxed; he had immediately understood that it was essential to relax. Only his index finger was slightly raised, supporting the hempen fishing line that the locals called a *boulantin*.

The quality of the line wasn't in question. His and Gène's were identical. Just now, Gène, who always guessed what he was thinking without ever looking at him, had suggested:

'Come over here. Take my place, hold my line. Could be you'll have more luck then.'

The sea, calm as a millpond, without a ripple, was breathing slowly but deeply. And this imperceptible movement troubled the doctor more than the turbulent pounding of waves might have. At every shift of the liquid surface, he could feel the lead weight on his line lifting from the bottom. So he leaned over the side. He could see about ten metres down, perhaps more, a scene to which he found it hard to accustom himself, rocks separating deep purple clefts, a plateau covered with seaweed, and most of all the fish,

quite big fish, silver or rusty-red, coming and going peaceably, in silence, hesitating sometimes for an instant in front of his bait. In spite of his efforts, his hand trembled, a slight moisture broke out on his upper lip, he was ready to give a tug on his line. Why had that fish turned away?

He raised his head and sighed. He found it impossible to stay long peering deep into the water. His heart was palpitating. He had a pain at the back of his eyes and a headache. It was becoming a nightmare. Every time he looked at the Mèdes rock, he had the sensation that the little boat, with its two pointed ends, was getting nearer to it. They didn't even have an anchor. Gène had simply dropped a large stone into the water on the end of a rope. Was he watching out for the rock? You could see quite clearly how the sea rose and fell, uncovering a large strip of viscous moss and shellfish. Without any breakers, the water was nevertheless covered with white foam, and some of the enormous bubbles washed up against the hull of the boat.

Gène sat on one of the thwarts, an old cap on his head, as motionless as a statue of Buddha, his gaze apparently ranging with indifference far into the dazzling horizon.

Of this, the doctor could only see a blaze that irritated his retina, whereas Gène, who could see everything, announced expressionlessly:

‘Here comes the *Cormoran*, she's back from La Tour-Fondue ... There's Joseph setting his nets by the lighthouse.’

As he spoke, he was pulling in his line, unhurriedly, as if checking that the hooks were still baited, but there was always a fish on the end.

‘A *péquois*.’

And he slipped it into a container full of fresh algae, picked up a hermit crab (they called them *piades* here), smashed its shell and threaded it on to the hook.

Rattled, the doctor hauled in his own line. It was jerking, alive. Every time it did this, he sensed he had a big catch, that a miracle was happening and that he was going to amaze the fisherman. And every time, it was one of those nasty fish covered with spines, not even a scorpion-fish, but what Gène called a *diable*, which had to be taken off the hook – first wrapping one's hand in a cloth – and thrown back into the water.

Why could he only catch these *diablos*, or at best tiny *sérans*? They were fishing in the same place, no more than a metre apart. You could see quite clearly down in the water the pink tips of the hermit-crab shells moving across the sea floor; twice their lines had become entangled. You could see the fish too. The doctor was certain he was making the same movements as Gène. He wasn't a novice. Back in Saint-Hilaire, he was the only angler capable of light fly-fishing on the Sèvre, a more delicate skill than sea-fishing.

He had taken a sudden dislike to that great rock rising up out of the sea so close to them, which continued, heaven knew why, to frighten him. He was getting equally irritated with the sea itself, the perfectly calm blue sea, on which he had been so happy to sail out on this little white boat with its blue gunnels.

His wife had not dared to tease him when he had come back from the cooperative store wearing a straw hat in the shape of a pith helmet, such as he had seen worn by the locals: she had simply said, with her provincial accent:

‘You bought a hat, then?’

He had only to look up to see her, perhaps three hundred metres away; it was difficult, with the water in between, to gauge distances. In the curve of the bay lay one of the island's sandy beaches, Notre-Dame Beach, shaded by umbrella pines. That white patch on the sand was his wife, sitting quite still, occupied in sewing or knitting. The black patch alongside her was Mariette, their young housemaid, whom they had brought on holiday with them from Saint-Hilaire. The tiny figure doing somersaults on the sand or climbing on to the women's laps was their son Michel, and the little girl, who was called back every time the water reached her knees, their daughter.

He could see them, and from where they were, they could see him, sitting at one end of Gène's small boat. It was very hot. Skin exposed to the sun would bake, and by next morning would have turned brick-red. He had experienced this the day before. He had gone out for a walk with his shirtsleeves rolled up. Now, as far as the elbows, his arms looked like raw meat, while higher up the skin seemed pale and unhealthy.

He felt light-headed. He was regretting having hired Gène for an afternoon's fishing. He would have liked to turn for home, but dared not suggest it.

It was looking down into the depths especially that did it. That clear landscape, so strange and inhuman that he felt he was discovering another planet. The smells too, the salt water, his fingers, which had been handling fish and shellfish, the fragrance from the sun-baked Mediterranean shrubs, carried out to them on the breeze.

He still clung to the childish hope of hooking a good catch and surprising Gène; he frowned even harder, and leaned out over the water until he was dizzy.

They had been in Porquerolles only four days, and already he was tired of it. Utterly worn out. The sun was exhausting. Everything required an effort, an effort to adapt, an effort to understand. The island was indeed beautiful, as his friend Gardanne, the painter of the river Sèvre near Nantes, had assured him. Probably he was just a fish out of water here himself.

'Pull in!' Gène said.

He hauled sharply on his line. There was something on the other end, but he had drawn up no more than two metres of it before the fish had escaped.

Now all he could think of was his headache. He was smoking, which was the wrong thing to do because it made him thirsty, and the local wine, which they had brought with them, had warmed up lying in the boat and made him feel sick.

Now and then the sound of an engine could be heard. It would be a boat like theirs, a little larger or smaller. Almost always, there would be one or more summer visitors aboard, while a local man stood motionless at the tiller. As it came level with them, he would lift his arm in greeting and Gène would do the same.

'It's Ferdinand,' he would say simply, as if that was enough, as if Ferdinand was world famous.

One of these bustling boats now headed straight for them. It had come from the harbour, not from the open sea. When it was a few metres away, the engine was cut and the boat drifted up until it gently bumped them.

‘You’re the doctor? Do you mind coming? It’s this woman, she’s dying.’  
And for Gène’s benefit, the man added offhandedly:

‘Frans’s wife.’

Then he explained:

‘Yeah, we do have a doctor on the island, but he’s away to Fréjus for a wedding, won’t be back till next week.’

‘You better get in his boat,’ Gène advised him. ‘Faster than mine, it is.’

The doctor was a big man. His ninety kilos made the boat lurch dangerously, and he almost fell into the other vessel, before finding himself sitting on a thwart.

‘Will you be going back now, Gène?’

‘Soon as I’ve pulled in the lines.’

‘Get any *péquois*?’

‘A few.’

The engine hiccuped, then started to turn over, the boat swung round in a half-circle and now the doctor could see Notre-Dame Beach, with his wife and children, on his left. He waved to them as they went past. He had tried to persuade them to come out in Gène’s boat, saying they could be taken back later, but Hélène hadn’t wanted anything to do with it. When they had arrived in their car at Giens Point, and she had seen the ferry, the *Cormoran*, waiting to take them over to the island, she had blanched; she had had to overcome her fear in order even to set foot on board, and now the thought of the end of their holiday, which would mean another sea-crossing, had become a nightmare to her.

They sailed on round some rocks, under an old fort baking in the sun and abandoned to the lizards. The family had been there for a walk the previous day. The ground was covered with a strange squashy vegetation, with red berries that crunched underfoot. The abandoned fort had no doors or windows left. Its walls seemed to be made of white dust, petrified over the centuries by the sun.

There, too, the doctor had felt ill at ease. It had made him think of the Middle Ages, the Crusades. He jumped every time a basking lizard or grass

snake made a move, although he had been assured there were no vipers on the island.

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘It’s her chest getting her. Nothing new, she’s been ailing for years, but this time, looks like the end.’

Here and there, on a beach or one of the island’s paths, he could see groups of people, standing still or walking, holidaymakers like his own family, setting out to explore the place, in white clothes and straw hats. Over there, the jetty. And the harbour, where a dozen yachts were moored, and a man under a derrick was painting a boat bright blue.

‘It’s not far, up behind the church. I’ll take you. You’ll tie up the boat for us, Polyte?’

They left it bobbing in the harbour. The air was thick and heavy. The ground, the trees, the walls, all gave off fumes, waves of heat. Instead of crossing the main square, a bare yellow expanse where groups of men were playing boules, they turned left, climbed a steep path and passed a rubbish heap: the doctor allowed himself to be guided and could still feel the movement of the sea inside his head: his whole body was continuing to live at a rhythm too calm and powerful to be its usual one, so much so that he felt for a moment the urge to feel his pulse, to check that it was normal.

‘Over this way ...’

They crossed a road, in a place where he wasn’t expecting to find one. They were very near the village, but a little above it, at roof level, and there under the trees, beyond a waste patch, was a row of low buildings, an old barracks perhaps, or, as it turned out, former storage huts for the French Army Engineers. Two women, standing out in the glare of the sun, watched them approach. On the ground near them, were two half-naked and grubby children.

And a door standing open on to a dark blue shadow, almost the same blue as the bottom of the sea.

The two women followed him with their eyes, without speaking. He almost caught his foot in the long prickly leaves of Barbary figs and cactuses growing there for no particular reason.

‘Go inside, doctor.’

At first he couldn’t see anything. Then a figure gradually emerged, a woman coming towards them from the dark interior. She said:

‘I think she’s just gone.’

The doctor glimpsed a red patch: a young girl, in a dress as scarlet as a flag, her thin legs bare, crouching in a corner, against the wall, and staring at them.

And finally, on a mattress on the floor, he saw or rather guessed at, the woman he had been called to attend, a motionless form under a blanket, the face terrifyingly thin, the eyes open and unseeing.

She had only just died. The body was still warm. He smelled broth and found a bowl which one of the women had no doubt brought her, but which was untouched.

‘She is dead, isn’t she?’

The eyes of the girl in the red dress were still staring at him through the darkness and he hesitated to answer the woman, who went on:

‘The last hour, she was trembling all over, I had to hold her ... Sweating too ... Bad smell ... I can still smell it on my hands.’

The young girl hadn’t budged. Crouched down as she was, it was impossible to guess how old she might be.

‘She did want to say something ... She kept trying, but no, she couldn’t manage it. In the end, I saw these two big tears in her eyes, and I thought then, this must be it. With her arms and legs going, like a rabbit when you knock it out. Just as you were getting in the harbour in Bastou’s boat ... But even if you’d been here, doctor, you couldn’t have done anything for her, could you?’

No, nothing. He looked around. The man who had led him there was talking to the two women outside. They were outlined against a dazzling sunlit rectangle. Another person was slowly climbing up the path, between the Barbary figs and cactuses. He wore a wide-brimmed gardener’s hat, and the blue of his overall was more sumptuous than the blue of the sky.

‘Look, here comes the mayor now, I sent after him.’



They weren't in a proper bedroom. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. There were four walls that had once been whitewashed. No window, just the open door. Alongside the mattress of the dead woman were others, covered with rags and old clothes serving as blankets.

Perhaps it was indeed the smell of sweat that lingered in the air, but mixed with other vague and bitter odours, a child's urine, sour milk, garlic and fish, as well as the fragrance of the pines and arbutus which was the background scent of the island.

'She's just died, just now; doctor's with her.'

The two women outside were reporting the death to the mayor, who now loomed up in the doorway, accustoming his eyes to the semi-darkness, then came forward and automatically took off his straw hat. But in order not to give too much importance to this gesture, he scratched his head, his dark hair standing up in spikes.

'Frans isn't on the island, then?' he asked.

He was the grocer from the shop on the village square, the doctor recognized him, since that very morning he had bought some sweets from him for his daughter.

'And you're sure she's dead?'

In reply, the doctor simply closed the dead woman's eyes, with a troubled glance at the red dress which had still not moved.

'Oh, it's a nuisance,' the mayor sighed, scratching his head again.

And turning to the women:

'How long has he been away?'

'Since day before yesterday.'

'So he might not be back for three or four days, say? Come here, my dear, when did your papa go away?'

The girl repeated:

'Day before yesterday.'

But she didn't move from the spot, still crouching against the wall.

'And you don't know how much money he had?'

'No.'

'Did he leave some for your mama?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where’s her purse?’

He looked around. It was the girl who pointed out to him a hole in the wall, at head height, and where there was indeed a battered purse. The grocer knew it well, because it was from that purse that the woman took her cash when she came to the shop.

‘Just six francs left,’ he announced.

Flies were starting to buzz at the back of the room where the corpse lay.

The doctor had been feeling disoriented for a while now. He didn’t try to react or understand. And yet the words burned themselves into his memory so forcefully, without his realizing it, that he was able later on to recall them with as much accuracy as the nursery rhymes learned in childhood. It was the same with the images, especially the red dress, the simple red cotton dress that the skinny young girl was wearing as her sole clothing. Her hair was pale blonde, her eyes blue. The dead woman too had fair hair, the colour of flax.

‘We’ll need to send Polyte off to get Frans. He’ll find him if anyone can ... It stinks in here. You coming outside, doctor?’

And the neighbour who had been there with the dying woman asked him, pointing to the corpse:

‘What’ll I do with her?’

Outside, through the greenery, could be seen the pink roofs of the village, the yellow church, the square where tiny figures were still playing boules; then the harbour with its sailing boats and sightseers, the jetty, the blue mountains of the mainland, and beyond, in the strip of sunlit sea, a warship steaming past at full speed: a torpedo boat with slim lines.

‘You’ll maybe come down to the town hall with me, got to get the burial permit?’

Then the mayor scratched his shoulder and complained:

‘We’re sure to have caught some fleas. It was crawling with ’em back there. Lucky for us you were there, I’d have had to get a doctor over from Hyères for the formalities.’

The doctor allowed himself to be led down, turning back from time to time, and the low row of army huts, with only one occupied, the grey-green cactuses and thornbushes, the tall umbrella pines with their sloping trunks, imprinted themselves on his mind, along with the women who had now moved towards the buildings, leaving the two half-naked children to themselves.

‘They’re the only people like that we’ve got on the island,’ the mayor explained, as they went down the steep path. ‘They came over under the old mayor, six years ago, or I’d never have let them settle here. They didn’t ask permission from anyone. They just appeared one fine day, off the *Cormoran*, with nothing but an old colonial tin trunk. They only had the two children then. The woman was pregnant. They didn’t ask anyone for anything. I don’t even know where they slept the first night, probably on the beach, although I think it was February or March, and the Mistral could’ve been blowing.’

They crossed the baking hot square surrounded by the eucalyptus trees shading both the façades of houses painted in glaring colours, red, blue and green, and the café terraces, empty at this hour.

‘Nobody said they could go and live in those buildings, they’re the property of the Army Engineers. People didn’t realize at first that’s where they were. My wife, one day, she saw the man come into our shop. He bought a candle, sugar, margarine, and paid for them. Then a few days later, he turned up at the town hall. It was closed as usual, so he went to find the mayor in his house. And he had to wait till he came back from fishing, because our old mayor, that’s all he did, go fishing. He took out some papers from his pocket, and said he wanted to declare a birth. The woman, she’d had her baby all on her own, up there where you saw her! On the papers, the man’s name was Frans Klamm. It might not be his real name. He was fifteen years in the Foreign Legion. You’ll see him, if Polyte manages to get hold of him. Wait, we’d better go and find Polyte in the harbour. Hey –’ turning to a child – ‘you haven’t seen your dad, have you, my dear?’

‘He’s just gone into Maurice’s café.’

‘Polyte! Hey, Polyte!’

A man wearing blue canvas trousers, a rumpled shirt and a seaman’s cap.

‘Ah, now Polyte, we need you. Can you get hold of Frans somehow? His wife has died.’

‘When did he go off?’

‘Day before yesterday.’

‘Who’s going to pay me?’

‘Don’t know. Well, town hall, I dare say, I’ll see to it. Know where you might find him?’

‘Might do.’

Other men were listening in the darkness of the café, where the zinc counter glinted.

‘Can I take Gène with me?’

‘He’s out fishing.’

‘No, he’s on his way back. Five minutes and he’ll be coming round the jetty.’

‘As you like. Doctor, you coming? Just wait while I get the town hall keys.’

And the grocer went inside the fragrant-smelling shop and took a bundle of keys out of the cash register. The town hall was nearby, only ten metres away, a white single-storey building: just the one room, with a little garden in front.

‘After you. At first we hoped the army would chuck them out. But they didn’t even bother about them. Sit down, I’ll just look for the forms, wait a bit.’

He opened the window to let the light in and fumbled in some pigeonholes full of papers. The room was small. There were paper chains on the walls and a tricolour flag behind the white plaster bust of a woman representing the Republic.

‘If they’d been beggars, we’d have had something to pin on them. But they were crafty enough never to ask for anything. You understand? Not even free medical care. And yet, God knows, she could have done with it.’

‘The husband works?’ asked the doctor, surprising himself by the sound of his own voice.

‘When he feels like it. You’ll see him. He’s quite good with his hands. He helps the fishermen mend their nets, or stands in for someone on a fishing boat. He does this and that, helps haul up a boat or clean the hull. An odd job here, an odd job there. They live on practically nothing. Then all at once, when he has a bit of extra cash, and he gets the urge, he pushes off. He never gets drunk on the island. He takes the *Cormoran*. And people know what that means. He’s been seen in Toulon. He goes straight there. And he goes on a blinder, know what I mean? Four or five days, no more, as a rule. Polyte knows some of the bars where he could be. The man doesn’t recognize anyone. He’s always alone. I never go to that kind of place, but the others tell me ... I knew I had these papers somewhere. Here we are. Got a pen on you? No? I don’t know if this one works.’

‘What was the name again?’ asked the doctor with the pen in his hand.

And he had to mop his brow and cheeks because of the sweat rolling down his face.

‘Frans Klamm. Let me check her name in the register ... A foreign name too. But she’s French. They *are* married, mind. I’ve seen their papers. Here we are. Frans Klamm. My word, he’s only fifty-two. If you were to see him, you’d be hard put to guess his age. The wife ... Anna Kayaerts. Born in Hondschoote. Apparently it’s on the Belgian border, near Dunkerque. She was only thirty-six last November. If you want to copy her name ...’

He wrote out the death certificate and burial permit, with a sputtering pen. The mayor scratched his head.

‘And now it’ll be a right business to get her buried. Thing is, there’s practically no room left in the cemetery, outside the family concessions. You’ll see. It’s very small. We’ve got two already in a temporary vault, waiting for a space. And she isn’t even from around here. In theory she’s got no right.’

He had obviously just raised a question that was of major importance to him, for he thought it over, muttering to himself, before finally coming to a decision:

‘I’ll have to call a council meeting. And what if Polyte doesn’t find him right away? ... With this heat, there’ll be an infection in two days. And it’s crawling with vermin up there, like I told you. My advice, by the way, is to change your clothes and have a bath when you get back.’

‘But where will you put her for now?’

‘Do you think I should ...?’

‘Or get the children away from there. Those two little kids playing outside, they’re hers, aren’t they? They can’t stay all night in the room where their mother ...’

‘No, of course not. But what can I do? Nobody’s going to take care of them, especially with the father away, because you never know how he’d take it. And as for her ... Unless we put her in the cells.’

He explained:

‘Behind the church, the council has a sort of lock-up, we sometimes use it as a police cell. It’s full of stuff. It’s where we keep the fire-fighting equipment, the benches and banners for the Fourteenth of July and St Anne’s Day. I’ll take a look. There’s a coffin in there. We always have one in reserve, for the few times we find someone drowned. Thank you, doctor. You’re at the Pension Saint-Charles, aren’t you? In case I need you again.’

He found himself back in the square and not sure what to do. No doubt his wife, Mariette and the children would be walking back slowly from the beach. The sun was starting to go down. The mayor had joined a group of boules players who had interrupted their game. They were standing around now, talking, looking both important and awkward.

The doctor had sat down on the terrace of the Arche de Noé Hotel and ordered an aperitif, since he still had a strange feeling in his chest.

Never had he felt so far away from home, or so far away from himself. The smell on his hands, which had been touching the hermit crabs and then the corpse, made him feel sick. He went to wash them at an enamel hand basin inside the café.

‘What did the mayor decide?’ asked the hotel owner, standing there in his white apron.

‘I don’t know ... I think maybe they’re going to take her to the lock-up.’

The group of men was heading for a lane at the side of the church. The doctor set off slowly to meet his family, and his route took him not far from the army huts, where now there were four or five women standing round the threshold, and a dozen children playing on the ground in front.

He couldn't see the girl's red dress, but went on past, and finally after a turning in the shade of the umbrella pines, caught sight of his wife walking along holding their younger child by the hand, while Mariette, carrying the picnic bag which now contained their sewing things, was further back, arguing with the older child, who was dawdling.

He approached them and could see his wife's lips moving already. She waited until they were nearer to speak.

'They came to call you out, did they?' she asked. 'For someone who was sick?'

As a doctor's wife, she was used to it.

'And what about the fishing? Did you catch anything? But what's the matter. You look red in the face.'

'Just a rush of blood to the head.'

'I'll bet you've got a touch of the sun again. Come on, Jeanne! Do what Mariette tells you!'

They were tired. It had been very hot. Everyone had damp skin and a sour taste in the mouth. Michel allowed himself to be pulled along. His father picked him up and carried him on his shoulders.

'Was it something serious?'

'It was all over by the time I got there.'

They would soon be back at the Pension Saint-Charles, with its white walls and blue shutters, its rooms painted a dazzling white, its guests now coming back, as they were themselves, from one of the beaches or from a boat trip, its waitresses laying the tables, and the smell of Mediterranean food.

They passed the army huts again on their way back. Some men were coming up the hill pushing a handcart on which the coffin had been placed, a simple box of plain deal, not even body-shaped, being both too wide and too long for the corpse it would hold.

The priest came out of the hut and walked away slowly, opening his breviary.

‘Was it there?’ the doctor’s wife asked.

The local children, now emboldened, had started a noisy game around the buildings. The group of women was larger now, and talking more volubly, one of the dead woman’s small children was eating a piece of bread and jam some kind soul had given him, and the girl in the red dress must have stayed in her corner inside, since the doctor couldn’t see her.

‘Leave your father’s hat alone, Michel!’ said Madame Mahé to her son, who was drumming on the straw helmet.

And she turned round to look at her daughter, still dragging her feet in the dust of the path, with the bad grace of tired children.





## 2. The Legionnaire's Return

He fished all night long. It was a matter of life and death. Was that really what the mayor had said, a matter of life and death? It was curious to have lived so long – because he was thirty-two after all, you're supposed to be a grown-up – and never known that the real attributes of a mayor are a grocer's blue overall and a straw hat! Why had people always hidden that from him? Because they were afraid he'd find these accoutrements ridiculous? But they weren't, not at all.

Why was it that he absolutely had to catch a *péquois*? There was some pressing reason. Something serious and essential. Never mind, since he knew it was serious, that was all that mattered.

He just had to. A *péquois*, not any other kind of fish, not a *diable*, obviously, like the ones that had attached themselves to his line to make him look stupid, not one of those pink *sérans* that always free themselves from the hook before they reach the surface, and not one of those flat silvery fish with black stripes all over like a zebra.

Was Gène hoping he'd get the wrong fish? Was that why he was watching him with that ferocious irony, all the while giving little tugs on his line? There was a trick, there had to be, a trick that Gène didn't want to pass on to him. The islanders were all in it together. You don't reveal the trick to outsiders. It's up to them to discover it, and if not ...

Well, he *would* discover it! It wasn't for nothing that he had the best-trained dogs in Saint-Hilaire, and that one Sunday, between six a.m. and midday, he had caught three pike and five or six perch on the Sèvre.

They were doing it on purpose, to make him get worked up and lose his composure. Gène was tugging faster and faster on his *boulantin*. To make him think that was the way to catch *péquois* – surely that had to be it?

Tomorrow, he'd buy some blue canvas trousers like everyone else, the bright blue that made such a sumptuous patch of colour in the sunlight. They were sold in the grocery store, by the man with the short thick hair. He must have shaved his head at some point, perhaps because of vermin? Hadn't he mentioned vermin? And now the hair was growing back, thick and tough, so black and so short that it looked as if it had been painted on to his skull with oil paint.

What was so important? It was stupid to have forgotten it. And now Gène had turned the boat again. That too was a trick. To unsettle the doctor, since the other man knew he wasn't used to the sea. The doctor looked up, and right enough, there was that grey rock in front of him, with the mass of viscous water rising and falling. He looked down into the depths to see if he could recognize a *péquois* among all the fish swimming there. He looked up again: now there was no rock, but a beach with tiny people: his wife, Mariette and the children reduced to the size of insects. He pulled up his line. He thought there was nothing on it. But no, there was a *diable*. He throttled it before throwing it back in the sea, so that he wouldn't catch it again. He looked up; this time there was no rock, no beach, not even the island, just water as far as the eye could see, and so dazzling that he had to shut his eyes.

And meanwhile, Gène wasn't moving. He was as motionless as a Buddha, as usual; and had the same beatifically ferocious smile. What was to say he wasn't being paid to see that the doctor didn't catch any *péquois*? A lean man with fine tanned skin. Every time *he* pulled in his line, there was a fish on it and the most extraordinary thing was that the *piade* was still intact. He hadn't needed to break open another hard shell with a hammer to extract another hermit crab.

Could it be that he was turning the boat just when he saw that the doctor was at last about to catch his *péquois*? It was easy to distinguish, even from a *sar*, a seabream. It was almost as flat, but not quite, and not quite as round either, because a *sar* was almost moon-shaped. And it had just one black spot, near the head. As for how good it was to eat ... why should it taste better than any other fish? But that was what they'd have him think.

He felt hot. He felt sick. Noises seemed to be pursuing him, to distract him from his fishing. First the sound of footsteps, a procession of footsteps on soft ground. It was the same every night. People stayed on the terrace of the Arche de Noé, in their shirtsleeves, drinking and listening to the jukebox. Then they went off in groups. Some of them kept walking up and down the jetty, and invariably, they would start singing. You could hear them from a long way off. They would come nearer, then move further away, but always with the same sentimental songs. Some of them went off down the Langoustier road, and at times the song would be interrupted by women's laughter.

Hardly had these sounds faded away before it was the turn of the cicadas, and when there were no cicadas, it was the frogs – they'd explained to him that there were frogs in the big reservoir which provided the island's drinking water supply.

Why did they think he would never catch a *péquois*? Even the mayor in his blue overall hadn't believed in him, he could sense it. All of them, when they talked to him, had the same ironic look in their eyes.

What was the reason ...?

He scratched himself. That was another thing they'd made him believe: that he'd be covered with vermin. Well, he wouldn't believe them, he'd stop scratching. He was thirsty. The bottle of lukewarm wine was out of his reach. If he took the time to drink, he might miss his *péquois*.

'François!'

How could his wife be calling him from Notre-Dame Beach?

'François!'

She was shaking him by the shoulder. He opened his eyes. Sunlight was flooding in through the shutters, and the bedroom was dazzling white from

floor to ceiling, except for the iron bedsteads. The window was open. Birds could be heard chirping in the trees.

‘Turn over, François ...’

He knew why. When he slept on his left side, he sometimes snored, or breathed noisily. They were not sharing a bed. The double bed in their room wasn’t wide enough for both of them. The doctor was a very stout man; ninety kilos. They had brought up another, narrower bed, as well as the two cots for the children, and all these beds were lined up in the sun-striped room like dominoes.

‘You were talking in your sleep.’

His pillow was soaking wet and smelled of sweat. He had the heavy head of a man who had drunk too much the night before. He closed his eyes, but now he could still see the rays of light, even through his eyelids. From the harbour came the irritating sputtering of two-stroke engines being started.

It was the fishermen, the real ones, the men who sold their catch at Hyères, setting out to pull in their lines on the far side of the island. The doctor had been to watch them the day before, in his slippers, with his nightshirt tucked into his trousers. The air, at that time in the morning, had a curious smell. The sea too. Particularly the sea. And the world was an extraordinary colour: clear, pale in a way, but a luminous kind of pale. Pale blue. Pale green. Even the brightly painted boats had an amazing lightness. Everything was covered with a film of dew.

He had felt something like vertigo at the sight. Was it all too much for him? He didn’t like to think so. He watched the boats leaving, one after another, all heading in the same direction, leaving behind them the same silvery wake, and in the boats the men busy mending nets, except for the helmsman, who was standing, the rudder wedged between his knees, as motionless as a statue, like Gène.

Why on earth had Gardanne sent them on holiday to Porquerolles? They weren’t comfortable here, neither his wife nor himself. His wife’s digestion was already upset from the southern food. And Jeanne had complained of stomach ache from the first day, so he had had to ask for her to be served rice.

His own sunburn was painful, and making him feel unwell. Even here, in bed, with the cool of the morning creeping in through the slats of the shutters, he felt as if he were sickening for flu.

The day before, no, it must have been two days ago, his wife hadn't wanted to go out straight after lunch, because she was afraid of the intense heat for the children. He wasn't used to taking a siesta. He had walked across the square, which was deserted, with blinds drawn down in every house.

He had just had one drink on the terrace of the Arche de Noé, because it was cool there. Inside, Polyte, stretched out full length on a banquette, was sleeping with his mouth open, his seaman's cap down over his eyes. From an invisible kitchen came the sound of someone washing dishes.

He had dragged himself as far as the harbour. The sailing boats were asleep as well. At the far end of the jetty, he had seen a little old man with a white beard, as thin as a boy, in clothes that seemed too big for him, rather like a cartoon character, now leaning over the edge dipping a bamboo stick into the water of the harbour.

'I'll get him, I will!' the old man had cackled.

'What?'

'The conger eel, of course! Best conger I've seen in my life. He's down there ... Oh, he knows all right I'm going to catch him in the end.'

He pulled the bamboo stick, the length of a fishing-rod, out of the water. On the end was a piece of wire about ten centimetres long, and on the wire a hook with a huge piece of something white.

'What's that?'

'Octopus. Piece of octopus cooked over a fire of mastic twigs. I'll get him with this, see if I don't.'

Why, as he spoke to the doctor, did he have that roguish grin? Was he joking? As he gesticulated, holding his fishing line, was he putting on some kind of act?

'Wait ... Look down there ... Here ... You'll see his nasty old head. He's there ... Look quickly.'

The doctor could see only the bamboo rod, its reflection cut in half by the water, and the green seaweed clinging to the jetty wall.

‘See him, did you? He’s the tenth, ooh no, maybe the hundredth I’ve caught from that hole. They’ve got a housing shortage like us! When I’ve got this one, there’ll be another one along, because that’s a deep hole.’

And the doctor had stayed there, with the sun blazing down on the back of his neck, watching and listening, stupidly. He’d waited almost an hour.

‘Stay here, because I’m telling you, I’ll catch him.’

It was time to go back to his wife. He turned around, almost regretfully. He had not yet reached the other end of the jetty when he heard a shout and some boys raced past him, to surround the old man.

Yes, it was true, he had got his conger out of the hole, a black, viscous monster, almost as thick as a man’s arm, now writhing on the uneven cobblestones of the jetty. The old man finished it off and was carrying it proudly at arm’s length, its still-twitching tail dragging on the ground, and heaven knew why, it looked somehow obscene.

Since then, whenever he thought about the jetty, he always saw the black head of the conger eel poking cautiously out of its hole, attracted by a repulsive piece of octopus bobbing about at the end of a wire. He imagined this sticky, snake-like creature being pulled forcibly out of its tunnel, then its head splitting open as it was hammered with a stone.

He wouldn’t get back to sleep now; perhaps he would drowse vaguely, dreaming of fish coming and going silently in a greenish world, watching each other from the corners of underwater avenues lined with rocks, and devouring each other. Michel, in his cot, began to sing, as he did every morning. His mother tried to sleep a little longer. In the adjoining room, just a cupboard without windows, so that they had to leave the door open at night, Mariette was using the basin to wash.

He wanted to find out whether they had found Frans Klammer yet. He was also curious to know how the girl in the red dress had spent the night. Had they left the three children alone in the army hut where their mother had died?

He got up and dressed. He felt nostalgic for their previous holidays, which they always spent in the same hotel near Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. They were welcomed there with joyful cries, as if they were members of the family.

‘Good afternoon, doctor! And madame! Oh, hasn’t the little girl grown! I’ve kept you the same rooms as last year, with a view on the river.’

They still had almost a month to go here, and if not for his self-respect, he’d have decided to leave already, to finish off their holiday in the place where they had been so happy.

He dared not say so to his wife. And yet he knew that she felt exactly the same way. Of course she did. But he kept repeating, in contrary fashion:

‘It’s marvellous here, isn’t it!’

He went outside, while Hélène and Mariette got the children dressed. It had already become a habit, in scarcely four days, to go down to the harbour to watch the *Cormoran* docking.

The heat was rising. Men like himself, summer visitors, were fishing in the harbour, where all they would catch were gobies, with their revolting fat bellies. Other incomers, women in summer dresses or shorts, were climbing down into the little boats that would take them for a tour round the island, or to Port-Cros.

He saw the mayor, still in his blue overall, with the same hat, pushing a trolley laden with empty orange-boxes towards the *Cormoran*’s jetty. Groups of local men, bare feet in their carpet slippers, not yet washed or shaved, were taking the air and looking at the white outline of the ferry as it approached from La Tour-Fondue.

‘So, *Monsieur le maire*, what’s happening?’

The mayor raised his hat to scratch his scalp or mop his brow.

‘We’ll see whether Polyte managed to find him.’

‘What about the children?’

‘Yes, well, we did try to take them away. My sister-in-law would have taken the little ones ... And the priest’s housekeeper would have taken Elisabeth.’

‘Is that the older girl? In the red dress?’

‘Yes. But she wouldn’t have it. She clung on to her brother and sister. She kicked up a terrible fuss. In the end we just had to leave them there.’

‘Alone?’

‘Well, she was the one who wanted it. Look! Polyte’s on board, I can see his cap.’

A white peaked cap with a gold badge, like an officer’s or a yachtsman’s. Gène was there too, and he greeted the doctor with his habitual ironic smile.

‘So doctor, what about those *péquois*?’

He was back from Toulon, bare feet thrust into espadrilles, wearing the same tight-fitting white T-shirt he had worn yesterday, and casually swinging his jacket in his hand. A crowd of visitors spilled off the boat. The bellboys from the hotels took hold of their luggage.

A man came down the gangway last of all, Frans surely, and by the look on his blank face, he had a serious hangover.

‘Go on down ... Move ...’

Polyte was pushing him along, like a gendarme pushing a prisoner, all the time winking and telling people:

‘He’s not sobered up yet. We made him drink plenty of cups of coffee, but they all came back up. Then we tried ether, but that didn’t work either. What do we do with him, Gustave?’

Gustave was the mayor, and he was giving priority to getting his empty boxes loaded on the *Cormoran*. As he waited, Frans stayed standing in the sun, unmoving. It was true that he seemed ageless. A thin man, lean and sinewy. His skin had been fair, but was now tanned by the sun, and he had the same cornflower-blue eyes as his daughter, and light-coloured hair, once blond perhaps, streaked with white.

He wore a dirty faded blue battledress and rope-soled espadrilles. He gazed at the bustle around him. He must have seen it all. He showed no impatience, nor did he seem surprised that Polyte had abandoned him and gone over to report to a group of locals.

Exactly like a prisoner. Like the convicts the doctor had once seen lined up in the tug taking them from La Rochelle to Saint-Martin-de-Ré, from where they would be dispatched to Guyana: they had shown the same



indifference. No doubt it had often been Frans's lot to be put in a train carriage or a boat, for some unknown destination, then to be set down at a station, an army barracks or a hospital, with a number attached to him.

He was stronger than the men surrounding him. The doctor could sense that. He felt vexed by it, but was nevertheless sure that Frans dominated all of them. The others came and went, chatted, burst out laughing, and he, standing alone in the sun, isolated by a formidable invisible barrier, neither trembled nor moved a muscle.

'I thought we'd find him by the station,' Polyte was explaining. 'Funny that. Most men, they want to get drunk, they head for the harbour, with all the cafés and the music. Or they try the whorehouses on the ramparts.'

The doctor was eavesdropping, without joining the group.

'But him, no! I wonder if he even notices women. Say, Frans, do you ever go to see the tarts in Toulon?'

Frans, who must have heard this, did not stir.

'Anyway, where I found him wasn't much fun. This little bar, nobody else there, just him in his corner, and the barman who wanted to go to bed ... I can tell you, he was far gone!'

"Frans," I says to him, "your wife's dead!"

'And I was shaking him and shaking him, and shouting:

"Hear me? Your wife's dead!"

'Well, he just looked at me and Gène – Gène was with me – just like he's looking at us now.

"You got to come with us," I says. "Understand?" I says. "We've got to bury her, your wife ... There's these papers to sign, and I don't know what else, but the mayor wants you there."

'Well, he just goes on drinking. Has the bottle of plonk in front of him. We help ourselves, Gène and me, he just lets us, he goes on drinking, pays us no attention at all.

"He's always like this?" I asks the boss, "when he comes in here?"

"Every time."

"Where does he sleep?"

“Don’t ask me. When I turf him out, he goes away. Must go to some other bar.”

‘So I says to Gène:

“What d’you think, what’ll we do?”

‘Because, see, it was nearly midnight. And I know his crafty little ways, he could have got away from us.

“Damn it all,” I says to Gène. “Don’t you want to sleep in a bed tonight?”

‘Gène’s wife’s not around, is she? No? OK. So we got him by the shoulders. He let us, and we kept telling him:

“You got to sober up, pal, because your wife’s dead. Dead, do you understand?”

‘Well, we couldn’t just walk the streets all night. So we took him up the Ramparts. To Flore’s place, know what I mean? And there’s these sailors there, and a few girls, without a stitch on ... Even ... Eh Gène, we played the pianola, didn’t we, and we stayed there, right?

“Got to feed him coffee to sober him up,” that’s what I told the madam, “on account of his wife’s died. And that’s why we’re here, come to that.”

‘Only, him! Yeah, you, clown face! Don’t look so innocent! Soon as we had our backs turned, he’s swallowed down our drinks! Then when he’d had the coffee, he started throwing it up all over the place, even got some on my trousers, and the old girl was for chucking us out. And it was this tart, dark girl she was and fat – ask Gène what she looks like – that went and fetched some ether from her room ...’

‘You finished yet, Gustave? What’ll we do with him?’

‘We’d better take him to the town hall. Come on, Frans, come with me,’ said the mayor. ‘Not drunk now, are you?’

The man shook his head and walked off alongside the mayor in the blue overall, while Polyte and a few other men followed behind, still passing comments.

‘Where’ve they put her?’

‘In the lock-up.’

‘It’ll stink the place out, like it did before. Have to disinfect it, like last time. Remember old Mouchi? Say, doctor, they ever tell you about old Mouchi? This old fellow, so old, no one knew when he came to the island. Sort of Italian, he was, you couldn’t always understand what he was on about. Once a year, in the spring, he used to shave off his hair and his beard with the shears you use for sheep, and then you wouldn’t recognize him, you’d think he was a priest. And then the rest of the year he let it grow, so you couldn’t hardly see his eyes out of all the bristles. Every afternoon, he’d go to sleep on a bench, in the square. He had a room of some sort, just by the barber’s. Nobody’d ever been in there. Anyway, one day, people said Mouchi hadn’t been out of his place for a week. So we go to fetch the mayor, the other one, the one before this one, and he says:

“Polyte, you go in to Mouchi’s and take a look.”

‘And when we opened the door, all these fleas jumped out at us, we had to run back out. And there he was, Mouchi, naked as the day he was born, long, long beard and hair, like I said, and stark naked, standing up at the table, leaning over it, and he was dead! Couldn’t go in, because of the vermin. We had to get a sulphate spreader we use for the vines. And we filled it full of formalin, and we puffed it out in front of us to go in. And when somebody touched him, he fell over like a tree trunk, and nobody could bend him after that. I’m right, aren’t I, lads? We stuffed him in a box, and put him in the lock-up, like Frans’s wife. And when we went to fetch the flags for the Fourteenth of July, months later, it was still as full of vermin as his room ...’

The men stood around outside the little white-painted town hall, into which Frans and the mayor had gone. The doctor had to move away, since he could see along the tamarisk walk his wife, Mariette and the children coming to meet him. It was time for Silver Beach.

He saw no more of Frans that day. Nor did he hear any news of him, since the people at the Pension Saint-Charles knew nothing about the affair.

Next day, as usual, he went out early, in order to leave the bedroom free for his wife and children to get up and wash. He heard the bells ringing. The church door stood open.

As he stood in the middle of the square, he saw two old men coming out of the church, carrying what looked like a coffin. Behind, in the shadows, he glimpsed a flash of red, and close by a white shirt-front, against a black suit.

He recognized at the foot of the church steps the grocer-mayor's handcart, shafts in the air. Frans himself had to steady the cart as they loaded the coffin on to it.

Then a choirboy ran down the steps, carrying the cross on its long black haft. Finally came the priest, muttering prayers.

The two men pushed the cart, one holding the shafts, the other from the side, for all the world like stonemasons on the way to a building site.

Frans was in black, a suit which seemed rather too big for him, but looked almost new. He was wearing a starched collar and a black ribbon for a tie. He had proper shoes on his feet, and they seemed to be uncomfortable to walk in.

Elisabeth must have owned no other dress than the red cotton one, as she was still wearing it. Someone had given her some black stockings, her mother's perhaps, which were corkscrewing on her thin legs. Her younger brother, aged about eleven, was wearing a first communion suit. The youngest child wore a blue dress, to which the doctor paid little attention.

The choirboy was walking quickly, flapping his surplice, underneath which one could see his heavy hobnailed boots. They all passed behind the houses round the square, and into an avenue of olive trees the doctor had not yet discovered.

He had followed from a distance, almost in spite of himself. The sloping path was lined with olive trees rustling with intense life. He could scarcely hear himself think for the sounds of birds and cicadas, and walking along, his steps occasionally disturbed a lizard or grass snake, which left a mark in the dust before vanishing into the dry grass.

The doctor dared go no further. He stood, watching the strange little procession as it wound its way in and out of sight between the zigzags in the path, finally disappearing behind a wall round a garden with leafy trees, which must have been the cemetery.

That afternoon, on his way back from the beach where he had lain in the shade of the umbrella pines, between the two women sewing and the children playing in the sand, he took his constitutional down to the harbour.

A man with no shoes on was using a scraper to clean the grey-green paintwork on the underside of a boat pulled up on land.

Bareheaded, he was wearing canvas trousers and, on his lean torso, a white vest, much worn under the arms.

It was Frans, the ex-legionnaire.

At the end of the jetty, the old man, whom the locals called the Admiral because he had once been topman on a five-master for the Bordes Line, was explaining with gestures to a group of visitors how he had caught an enormous conger eel from the hole, and that he would perhaps now catch another.

In the cabin of a moored yacht, a gramophone was playing Hawaiian music, and some village boys, in thin underpants instead of swimming costumes, were swimming among the boats.

The man was scraping the paint without looking round, his movements steady, unhurried and regular. No one was taking any notice of him. Further along, a few fishermen, seated on the ground, were mending nets, using their big toe to stretch them out.

The doctor wandered about like a stray child. He would have liked to approach Frans and talk to him, but he had no idea what to say. It was absurd. He walked in circles, pretending to be interested in the various activities in the harbour, then, feeling thwarted, he made a sudden about-turn, deciding to rejoin his wife and children, who were sitting on a bench in the square.

But he did not go there straight away. First he walked up the steep path on the left, to the waste ground with its thorny plants.

The army huts glowed red in the setting sun, a warm, deep red, standing out against the dark green of the pines. But there was another red patch, of a quite different tone.

Outside, in front of the dark doorway, Elisabeth was leaning over a tub, washing clothes. There was no sign of the eleven-year-old boy. Perhaps he

was swimming with the others in the harbour water with its streaks of oil.

The youngest child was sitting on the ground, playing with a grubby bundle of rags as a substitute doll.

The silence was total in this part of the village. There was no sound of cicadas. In the distance, only faintly audible, came the Hawaiian music from the yacht, a tinny and derisory tinkling.

A warship was once more slipping noiselessly between the island and the coast, on its way to Toulon.

Elisabeth stood up, pushing back her sun-bleached hair from her face. In that movement, she turned towards the doctor, standing there without moving: he must have seemed enormous, and perhaps even threatening in his stupid stillness.

He thought he saw her frown, then she glanced at her little sister, as if to protect her.

‘François, where’ve you been? We went looking for you in the harbour ...’

‘I was just taking a walk. Is it supper time already?’

‘Mariette thinks she heard the bell. You know Madame Harmoniaux doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

They crossed the square. People were already dining on the terrace of the Arche de Noé. Their boarding house looked tiny, its whiteness even more dazzling against the royal blue shutters. It was so small that he felt he had to bend down and shrink himself as he went into the corridor and then the dining room, laid with white tablecloths, where middle-aged guests were chewing in silence.

‘Fish again,’ sighed his wife, who only liked fresh-water fish. ‘Do you think Jeanne ought to eat it?’

He must have said yes, absent-mindedly. He wasn’t aware of it.

‘But yesterday, you said ...’

‘Oh, yes. Well, she’d better not, then.’

‘But I can’t keep asking for rice every mealtime. Perhaps if I had them cook her an egg?’

In front of him, the wine bottle labelled with their name was half-full, standing alongside a bottle of mineral water and their napkins in numbered rings.



### 3. The Garden Gate

What on earth was the explanation? A few moments earlier, just a few seconds, even fractions of seconds before perhaps – it was hard to say – he had been sitting in the garden, his belly in front of him, because they had lunched well, and he was puffing at his pipe while chatting to P  chade, his good friend Armand P  chade, with whom he had been at medical school, and who was now in practice at Bressuire, a mere fifteen kilometres from Saint-Hilaire. In other words, he knew him well, indeed almost better than his own wife.

And then, suddenly, for no reason, what had been a feeling of well-being was turning into a malaise. Unlike the eyes of a sleeper, which dilate on waking, the doctor's pupils seemed to be contracting. He could see at first only a tiny section of space, Dr P  chade's mouth and a corner of his cheek. P  chade was saying something. It was extraordinary, almost repulsive, to see the rolls of fat with pink inside, parting, closing, stretching, uncovering the little yellowish bones, irregularly positioned, that were his teeth. It reminded the doctor of something, he couldn't remember what, and it was only much later, when he had pronounced his famous sentence, that light dawned. What it reminded him of – but he didn't know that yet – was the conger eel that the Admiral had tempted out of its hole under the jetty, almost a year ago now, that fat sausage of thick, compact flesh, that skin stretched tight over a life that couldn't quite be crushed out.



He had never before noticed that Péchade had one cheek fatter than the other, nor that his stubble showed through, and in fact he must always have five-o'clock shadow, because even on a Sunday his skin was bluish-grey.

He could hear the words. His friend was talking about typhoid fever. But the syllables were meaningless. The phenomenon was getting worse. It wasn't only the mouth and cheek that he was contemplating, as if they formed a separate piece of the universe, it was the house, the garden where they were sitting, the women close together on one side, the black iron gate with the road beyond it, and down below, against the sky, the slate-roofed belfry of the church.

Like Péchade's cheek, it had all suddenly stopped living its usual life. And the most alarming thing of all was that the doctor could see himself, sitting on the bench, leaning slightly to one side, his arm along the back, his legs crossed, in his khaki breeches and his lace-up boots. He could see himself, feel himself encrusted into the scene, and the scene itself looked like a picture postcard. He could have stood up and gone into his surgery, where, in a drawer stuffed with odds and ends, advertisements, used syringes and medical samples, there were still at least a hundred old postcards, all depicting the same scene. You could see some of them, yellowish and fading, in the window of Mademoiselle Julie's, the haberdasher's near the station, which also sold toys and seeds for the garden.

They showed a photograph of the house, the very house in front of which he now sat. His predecessor had ordered the photograph from a perambulating salesman who was in the region taking pictures of churches, old mills or hotels for visitors.

The former doctor, whose name was Riou, had had a shock of fine white hair. He it was who had trimmed the box trees in the garden into the strange shapes they still had. On the greyish postcard, the old man was shown sitting casually on the same bench, in the same pose as his successor, while his daughter, Mademoiselle Fernande, who was now almost sixty, but had been hardly more than a girl at the time, pretended to be cutting flowers from the standard roses.

The house was grey, with a dark slate roof, and there were black iron railings round the garden; the white-painted shutters at the windows, a slightly grubby white, made everything else appear all the greyer.

Today was a sunny day, late in June. The air was still and warm. There was no one in sight on the road, apart from two cyclists who had stopped for a chat at the crossroads. What was strange, worrying, even disturbing, was the immutability of the scene. The sight, for example, over a shop front with closed shutters, of two words written in large black letters: 'AGAT, ironmonger'.

The women were knitting. It was as if they had been knitting for ever, as if the woollen garments, and the hands mechanically handling the needles, were eternally locked into this fragment of the world.

Perhaps the doctor had over-eaten, and it was making him drowsy? And yet he was quite clear-headed. He'd had a good day. Early that morning, he had left the house on his heavy motorbike to go catching crayfish. He'd taken Agat on the pillion, the same Agat as on the sign, the ironmonger, because he didn't like doing anything on his own. They had put down their special nets. By ten a.m. they were already back home. He had gone into the barber's for a shave; on Sunday mornings he liked not having to shave himself. Then he had gone to high mass with his elder child, the daughter. Afterwards, Péchade, his wife and their three sons had come to lunch.

Perfectly normal. A typical Sunday for the season. Winter was the time for hunting: partridge and hare at first, then rabbits. Once the hunting season closed, there was always fishing in the Sèvre and, as just now, catching crayfish. It had been a better year than usual too, since he had allowed himself two new toys: a rod for fly-fishing, with a marvellous reel, that had cost a lot of money, and his powerful and noisy motorcycle, on which he liked to do his rounds in the countryside.

Porquerolles had never been mentioned, not by him at any rate. He'd gone back to wearing his thick corduroy breeches, his laced boots and his heavy jerseys. He had gone back to finding his surname – 'Mahé' – on fifteen or twenty businesses in the neighbourhood, because the region was

full of Mahés, not all related to him, or if so, only very distantly. Mahés and Lansquets. His mother was a Lansquet.

Twenty or fifty times, he had gone past the house where he had been born and raised, another corner house on a crossroads, in a neighbouring village: nowadays it was a café.

So he was solidly rooted. He avoided remembering the Porquerolles holiday, and didn't even want to think about it. Hélène, his wife, sometimes mentioned it, to Madame Péchade, for instance, but always to complain about the steak fried in oil, the fish soup, the mosquitoes and the scorpions. Because one morning, when turning the children's mattresses, as she did every day, she had indeed found in Michel's bed a big black scorpion, its tail raised threateningly.

They were so far from thinking of Porquerolles that, just last week, he had written to Monsieur and Madame Le Guen, who kept the family boarding house on the Sèvre where the Mahés usually spent their holidays. They had booked rooms for the first week in July.

And even a moment before, the doctor had not been thinking about Porquerolles at all. He was sure he hadn't been thinking about it. He had been looking at his friend Armand's mouth, listening, without hearing them, to the syllables in the air, as his gaze rested on the garden, the clipped box hedges, the women in their white blouses – except for his mother, always in black or grey, who was just now mending a pair of the little boy's trousers.

Michel had been ill. Twice. The first time, almost as soon as they were back home, he had had measles. Then in the spring, at the same time as his sister and the doctor, a throat infection had kept them all in bed, so that Péchade, this same friend who was here today, had had to look after his patients for a fortnight.

Péchade was ill too. He was always ailing, and his complexion was unhealthy. His wife was the only person in their house in good health, since the three boys had no sooner recovered from one illness than they caught another.

There were no clouds in the sky, and yet it was a dark blue, verging on violet, and the air seemed to stand still: all the houses round about were

grey, plastered in the local roughcast with a few pink bricks round the windows, and the slates on the black roofs were clearly outlined as if with Indian ink.

‘I think ...’

He had been going to say something. Péchade stopped talking and listened. But the doctor fell silent, and motioned to his friend to carry on.

He had blushed, as if caught out in something. And yet he knew, now, that he was going to say it. He was waiting for a favourable moment, forcing himself to listen to his colleague’s words, while failing to concentrate on them.

‘Brédecart claims ...’

Brédecart had been one of their professors at medical school.

‘... that it’s Parisians who come on holiday who start these epidemics. They’re not ...’

‘I think ...’ began Dr Mahé again.

He could see himself, hear himself, still encrusted in this world of frightening immutability, and he had to make an effort to escape that depressing sensation.

‘I think we’ll go to Porquerolles instead ...’

His mother was the first to look up, since despite her age she was more alert than Hélène. She was also the only woman he was afraid of. He had always lived with her. When he had married, he had not had like other men, who leave home, a feeling of freedom.

Life had continued, just as when he was a child going to school. It was still his mother, even today, who woke him in the morning, and told him when to change his underclothes.

She had a very gentle air about her. Her voice was soft. She looked after everyone, watched over everything, sat up at night with the children when they were ill.

All the same, he was afraid of her.

‘What on earth do you mean?’ she said, in the same voice she would have used in the past to pick him up on some mischief.

‘I said ... I’m not sure yet ... I wanted to have a word about it with Péchade, that’s just it.’

His friend had already understood that they were on delicate ground. As for Hélène, she looked in turn at her husband and her mother-in-law, hoping that someone would put an end to this bad joke.

‘There have been cases of typhoid all along the Sèvre, and especially over by Saint-Laurent and Mortagne ... The children have never been exposed to it.’

‘There have been a few cases here too.’

‘Only three, not the same at all.’

Although he could see that Péchade was embarrassed, he called on him to back him up.

‘The children, especially Michel, have had a bad year. Michel hasn’t put on any weight for six months. I’m sure that a change of climate ...’

His wife risked a word:

‘Last year, in Porquerolles, he was no better, and he had a lot of tummy trouble as well.’

‘When we got back, he picked up again. That’s what counts. Don’t you think so, Péchade?’

He preferred not to look at them, and not to look at himself.

He had just made a shattering discovery. That he had spoken about this wish to go to Porquerolles as if it were a shameful desire.

That was why, for a year, he had not wanted to think about it. In fact he had never consciously thought about it. True, Porquerolles had never vanished from his memory. On the contrary. But it had shown itself in a different form, like a photographic negative.

When he went fishing, for example. Even with the new rod! He had felt listless, without energy. He found himself stopping still, as if he were searching his unconscious for some stronger sensation.

It was the same when he rode his big motorbike, past fields where they were beginning the harvest, with heavy ox teams. He would arrive in farmhouses smelling of silage and soured milk. The people spoke to him in patois. Everything was in its proper place.

Whereas in Porquerolles, things were hostile to him. He had tried in vain to lessen their impact. Down south, all the time, he had felt as if there was a tremendous chaos around him, a kind of life that was too vivid, so that the slightest contact with it made his blood pulse more quickly, and prompted a rising fever inside him.

All year, he had been determined never to go back there. It was quite deliberately that he had written last week to book the rooms with the Le Guens.

How could he explain that it had come as no surprise to him when he now announced his decision to go to the south of France?

Because it *was* a decision, no mistake, and the others, who knew him well, were in no doubt about it either. He had lived too long with his mother to tell her:

‘We’ll do this or that.’

He came at it differently. He would hesitantly remark:

‘I think it would be preferable ...’

If he was contradicted, he sometimes backed off. Not for long. He would return to the charge, head down, brow bent:

‘I wonder whether we should in fact ...’

To prove it, this time he was tackling Péchade on a subject he had never raised before. He was talking to him about Michel’s legs, his spinal column, his fear that the boy might have inherited weak bones from his mother. Because one of his wife’s sisters had tuberculosis of the bones.

‘Oh, surely, François,’ his mother protested, ‘you’re not going to suggest that Michel ...’

‘No, of course not! I’m not suggesting anything. I’m only saying to Péchade that sea-bathing would be just the thing for the child.’

‘You don’t need to go to Porquerolles or any other blessed place for that. Les Sables d’Olonne is hardly any distance.’

‘What do you think, Péchade? In the first place, in Les Sables there are thousands of children. And secondly, I don’t think the change will be enough of a contrast. Well, anyway, we’ve got time to think about it.’

It was over. Decided. Now he knew that he would not spend the holidays either at Les Sables, or on the banks of the Sèvre. He needed something else, to detach himself from this landscape which now seemed to him terrifyingly empty.

‘Time for liqueurs perhaps?’

When his wife returned with Mariette, to serve tea for the women and spirits for the men, he saw that her eyes were red. She had been crying, sniffing rather, because she wasn’t capable of whole-hearted distress.

‘We’ll have to eat fish soup again, then!’ she tried to joke.

It hurt him a little, because he felt her objection was less trivial than it seemed. If they had never spoken together about Porquerolles, as one does naturally about a summer holiday, it was because there was a sort of taboo surrounding the word.

He had nothing to reproach himself with. Nor could his wife reproach him with anything. On the contrary! In the south, he had spent more of his time with her and the children than he would at the Le Guens’ place, where he would go fishing for whole days on end.

In fact he had hardly left her side on the island, except in the early mornings when she was getting the children up and washing them, or when she was putting them to bed. Then he would go down towards the square, feeling the need to announce:

‘I’m just going as far as the harbour while I wait for you ...’

And again, he hadn’t done anything wrong. He hadn’t spoken to any strange woman. He didn’t turn round, as some men did, to stare at the female holidaymakers in shorts.

And yet, if his wife did happen to join him, he would give a start and explain, pointlessly:

‘I was just looking at that boat over there. Do you think ...?’

Or if she asked him: ‘Where’ve you been?’ he didn’t know what to reply. He hadn’t been anywhere, he’d just wandered round the harbour, or strolled past the boules players.

Why was she so instinctively hostile? At home, she never asked him where he was going. And he didn’t bother to tell her. He would get on the

bike, zoom off through the village, and come home at all hours, often when the women and children were already at table.

‘Someone has phoned from La Béchellerie.’

‘I know what it’s about. I’ll go over there tomorrow.’

‘But it seems to be urgent.’

‘It can wait.’

They didn’t contradict him. But as soon as it concerned Porquerolles ...

His mother too seemed to suspect heaven knew what, some secret.

And he felt himself blushing.

A little later, he overheard his wife saying in a whisper to Madame Péchade:

‘I don’t know what’s brought this on. I’ve never seen him so touchy as when we were down there. Everything got on his nerves, he would blow up at the slightest thing ... And now he seems determined to go back there!’

As usual after having Sunday lunch together, the two men got up and went for a stroll down the road. Mahé felt the need to explain to his friend ... but what was there to explain exactly?

‘It’s going to be hard!’ he sighed, nevertheless.

‘This Porquerolles business?’

‘Yes. We’ll have to have a talk tonight when you’ve gone. They’ll gang up on me.’

‘Your wife doesn’t look too pleased about it.’

‘Oh, if we listened to her, we’d never go on holiday at all, we’d never leave the house, she’s capable of sewing away behind the curtains here all year long.’

In the shady café interiors, dark-clad men were playing cards, and they too, like the weathered benches and the varnished tables, seemed to have been sculpted into the solid scene.

Sometimes, especially on Sundays, he felt repelled by them, every single one, with their black serge suits, their ruddy faces and their clean white shirt-fronts.

‘What about you? Are you going to your in-laws as usual?’



Péchade didn't seem troubled by the prospect. The milestones stood out harsh and white on both sides of the road. Hedges, fields with cows in them, cyclists starting to return with bunches of yellow broom on their handlebars, girls in their Sunday best, linking arms and strolling in groups that blocked the road.

Further down the road, less than two kilometres away, was that other grey house, with its barns and stables, his father's house, the Mahé who was still talked about in the region, and who was gradually becoming a legend.

'A giant of a man, he had to bend his head to come through the door ... Built like a wardrobe.'

François had scarcely known him, since he was only three when his father had died.

'On market days, I've seen him line up ten beers on the table and knock them back faster that it would take you to drink one.'

He was a horse dealer, And they also remembered the famous piebald pony that ...

Why did even these memories appear to him as if they were cut-out scenes, in crude colours, with the vulgar and embarrassing clarity of picture postcards?

One day at the fair ... Yes, he had heard this story a hundred or even five hundred times. They would appeal to him:

'That's right, ain't it, doctor? ... We were just talking about your father ... He'd done it two or three times before, mind. He'd get the piebald pony by its front legs and cross the road carrying it across his back. And one day, the November fair it was, St Andrew's Day, he'd bet I don't know how much with his pals he could do the same with his old grey mare. He'd had a skinful, seeing as it was five in the afternoon. But you know, you could get him to drink as much as you wanted, he never lost his wits, and he could strike a mean deal with anyone ... So they're out on the road, and someone fetches the grey mare ... He gets hold of her front legs like the pony, but of course the mare was heavier by, oh, a quarter. And someone says to him:

“Leave off, Isidore, you'll do yourself a mischief!”

‘But the others, they’re egging him on. So anyway, he lifts her up, true as I’m standing here, and when he moved off you could see his legs bending under him. But he went on with it, three steps maybe four, seems his veins were standing out blue. And then he fell down, without a sound. Dead! What a man, though, eh!’

But François had been brought up in that house, all the same. They had continued to sell horses. There was always a little room where they served drinks. His mother was already as slight and thin as she was today. He heard her telling off the stable lads from morning to night. It was no trade for a woman. People said: ‘She’ll have to sell up one of these days.’ But what would she have done, when there was no money left in the house and a boy to bring up?

She had soldiered on, serving up drinks, going to the customers in the stables, locking the stable lad in at night when he had drunk too much, and in the end her son had been able to go to medical school.

So it was over. She had brought him up, made a gentleman out of him, had bought him a house and Dr Riou’s former practice, and had found him a wife. Because she it was who had arranged his marriage.

And she was still running the household.

What more could he ask for? He had a quiet life, plenty of free time to go hunting and fishing whenever he wanted to. Good dogs. And anyone from the village would readily keep him company.

So?

What was all this about Porquerolles, where he had been the first to complain about the food and the beds?

‘Do any fishing down there?’ Péchade was asking, as he walked along with him.

He didn’t know what to reply. He had only been fishing the one time, with Gène. Every time the man met him, he’d say:

‘What about tomorrow, doctor?’

‘Maybe some other day.’

The weirdest thing was that what had been holding him back was some kind of shyness. He felt awkward, out of place. For a couple of days he had

gone round wearing blue trousers, bought at the mayor-grocer's, rope-soled espadrilles and a white shirt with its sleeves rolled up.

That was what the locals wore, and quite a few of the holidaymakers who were working hard at playing boules.

He had felt, when he was dressed like that, that his wife was sneaking glances at him. Sometimes, from a distance, she didn't recognize him. Was he too fat? There were plenty as fat as him, or more so, among the fishermen.

His skin was too white, certainly. He got sunburnt. His skin turned brick-red and peeled, and he pulled off long, transparent strips of it.

He had stopped wearing the blue trousers all of a sudden. Sometimes he wore a collar and tie, as he had always been accustomed to.

Not once had he had occasion to speak to Frans Klamm, and yet he had seen the man almost every day. Klamm was always round the harbour, barefoot, with a gait that distinguished him from everyone else, at once stiff and supple. You never heard him approaching. He didn't displace any air, and one was surprised to see him passing close by.

Under the blazing sun, he would be hailed by cries:

'Frans! Hey Frans! Come over here. Get a hold of this net.'

And he would obey, as docile as a beast of burden. He did what he was asked. He was the servant at everyone's beck and call. People threw him coins. Or invited him on board a boat to finish up the remains of a stew. He would eat slowly, always sitting very still, and his gestures were oddly delicate, even if he was eating with his fingers.

Truthfully, the doctor hadn't thought about him for a year, nor about his daughter in the red dress, who was so thin, nor about Polyte sleeping peacefully on a bench in the café, in the blue shadows, untroubled by the noise around him.

Now, if he asked himself scrupulously – and it was because he was doing so unwillingly that he felt embarrassed – he admitted to himself that he had not needed to think about them, because he had always known he would go back.

It was a sort of tacit understanding. Even when he had written that letter to the Le Guens.

What would Armand Péchade say, if he told him: 'I wrote to the Le Guens to book rooms, but I knew we wouldn't be going there'?

He would be accused of duplicity. And yet there was no duplicity in him. He just knew. That was all.

But why? That was another matter. When they had been aboard the *Cormoran*, approaching the island which they were seeing for the first time, he would willingly have turned back, like his wife, but for different reasons.

It was beautiful, certainly. Magnificent, in fact. Was it because he was leaning forward in the bows of the boat watching the water dividing as the keel thrust forward? He could see the seabed. And the seabed loomed vertiginously close, with its rocks, valleys and feeding grounds, since he now knew the fish had feeding grounds. From that moment, he had felt the same vertigo he had experienced much more powerfully when he was out fishing with Gène.

The bottom of the Sèvre, and the fish in the Sèvre, had nothing like the same effect on him.

Down there in the south was a hostile world, a world so foreign to him that he felt quite lost. The island itself. Its throbbing heat as if in a belljar under the sun, the scorpion in his son's bed, the deafening sound of the cicadas.

Well! Just now in the garden, it was that sound that he had suddenly missed, a year later. The air had seemed empty, the road deserted, the village entirely dead.

He wanted to be walking out of the Pension Saint-Charles and down to the harbour, alone, to watch someone hauling up, on the end of a line, a great octopus, its tentacles pulsing with indifferent life.

He both longed for that and dreaded it. He knew that he would be unhappy there, that he would feel an outsider.

His wife was jealous! Because her distrust, her hostility, reflected nothing other than jealousy. But what had she to be jealous about?

He gave a start, surprised to find he had walked a hundred metres with his friend Péchade at his side without saying a word, and that Péchade too had been quite silent.

‘Perhaps we should turn back?’

‘If you like. Anyway, we must be getting along. I wonder if I left the car in the sun.’

And yes, he had: the black car was sitting in the sun, in a little side lane. The three boys had to be dressed for going home, roses had to be cut for Madame Péchade (whose own garden was full of them). At the last minute, they remembered a recipe she had been promised, but which had been forgotten. The women started looking in drawers.

‘I tell you,’ the doctor’s mother was repeating to her daughter-in-law, ‘you lent it last week to Madame Delépine.’

‘Never mind, Hélène, I’ll take it next time ...’

Sunday evenings tasted of dust, perspiration and alcohol. They all clustered round the car, checking that the doors were properly shut, winding down the windows to shake hands one last time.

‘You’re not coming to Bressuire this week?’

‘Possibly ... I may have a patient to see in the hospital.’

The car disappeared down the road. They walked back through the garden, after closing the black iron gate which squeaked on its hinges. The children went ahead, Jeanne holding her little brother’s hand. Her hair had been curled into ringlets, which hung down silkily on either side of her face, and she wore a large bow on top of her head. The doctor sensed that the two women were stealing glances at him. He walked heavily, dragging his feet, and took time over emptying his pipe, tapping it against the heel of his boot.

As they were going up the stone steps, his mother said:

‘So it’s decided, is it?’

She knew him. He contented himself with a nod, a yes that dared not yet come out into the open.

‘As you wish. You’ll have to write straight away to the Le Guens. You might even telephone them perhaps?’

To get rid of her, he replied:

‘I’ll do it right away.’

And he went into his surgery to ask for an outside line. Behind the door of an open cupboard was an enamel washbasin and a diamond-shaped mirror. He looked at his reflection. He had a round head, a low brow and firm flesh, reddened by either his blood pressure or the sun.

And as he stood looking at himself, his lips parted in a smile, a smile he had not seen for a long time, literally the smile of a little boy who has got his way.

‘Hullo, Madame Le Guen? ... Yes, of course I recognized your voice. All well with you? ... A lot of visitors ... Yes ... Now, I have to tell you that we will be unable to come to you again this year ... ’

The telephone was on his untidy desk, encumbered with objects: a blood pressure cuff, medicines, a stethoscope, spoons for pike fishing ... He had to restrain himself from leaning on one elbow as he talked, and sweeping everything off with a lordly gesture.

In a week’s time ...

Unless they left on the Saturday, which would give two days extra? Yes! The women would complain that there wasn’t enough notice to do the packing ... But they’d have two more days.

He stood up after finishing the call and, standing alone in his surgery, filled his pipe as sounds of whispering came from the kitchen.



## 4. Elisabeth's Fall

He was sitting, or rather sprawling, huge thighs apart, on the blue-painted bench between two shutters of the same blue, in front of the Pension Saint-Charles. The windows were open and he could distinctly hear the sound of forks on plates.

It was early evening. Too soon for the lamps to be lit. Outlines were still clear, too clear, but the light had lost its shimmer, it had dulled. At this moment, at this time of year, in thousands of seaside boarding houses and hotels, families were hastening at the sound of a dinner gong or a little bell to take their seats around identical tables. Thousands of children, whose mothers were desperately trying to hush them up, were asking in their shrill voices, as they fidgeted with everything:

‘What’s for supper?’

Bottles of wine already started and labelled stood on the tablecloths, alongside the mineral water and an occasional pillbox or some other medicinal product.

The storm hadn’t broken yet. Leaving her son and daughter with Mariette, already sitting at table, the doctor’s wife came to the front door, standing aside to let Madame Harmoniaux go past.

‘I beg your pardon, madame.’

‘It’s time for ...’

‘It’s my husband, he’s late.’

And once outside:

‘François, come and have your dinner. It’s not worth waiting for Alfred. He eats much faster than the children.’

Just at that moment, the storm broke out overhead, large drops of rain at last splashed on to the thick greenery and fell softly, puncturing the off-white floury dust of the road.

One could sense heads going up, and deep breaths being sighed:

‘At last!’

They had been waiting for this storm for a fortnight. All day, every day, the sky had been as heavy and leaden as skies in Africa, the dazzle from the sea hurt your eyes and gave you a headache after a while. As evening came, great violet clouds piled up in the purpling sky. They swelled almost directly above the island, like tumours ready to burst. Whenever a slight breath of wind stirred the leaves and imperceptibly ruffled the burning hot dust on the ground, people had the same little thrill of emotion. Thunder rumbled in the distance, but then, for two weeks on end, they had had the disappointment of seeing the rain pour down on the mainland, almost always at exactly the same point on the Maures mountain range that loomed on their horizon. From the jetty, or any other spot, people stood and watched grey veils of rain falling in the distance, like a hosepipe’s contents multiplied millions of times in size, before trudging heavily back to take their places at table, as charged with electricity as the cats and the insects.

But this time, the rain really had come. The Mahé family had a table near the window, since it wasn’t their first or their second year at Porquerolles, but already the third. Madame Harmoniaux herself, who normally moved with the ponderousness of a castle on a chessboard, came to see if they wanted anything, and the doctor called the waitress familiarly by name:

‘Eva!’

And the plump girl in the white apron served them with a complicit smile.

He was eating in his shirtsleeves – sleeves which his wife had cut to elbow-length. Through the shirt’s open collar, you could see the line between the white skin on his torso and his tanned neck.



The children were older now. Other children, whom they had met that first year, had grown bigger too. Some of the boys' voices had broken. There was an empty chair at their table and a place laid.

'He must have taken shelter somewhere because of the storm,' Hélène said, as she served Michel's helping.

And, surprised to see her husband frowning and looking so impatient, she defended her nephew, since he was her elder sister's son, whom they had brought on holiday with them.

'It's the first time he's ever been late.'

'That's the point! Today of all days!'

'You're not eating anything.'

'Yes I am ...'

He felt such acute anxiety that he wondered whether he wasn't going to go out, go up there, assure himself that ... And to cap it all, Mémé was facing him, alone and quite calm, seated at a small table. He couldn't avoid seeing her. She was enormous, with her sun-baked skin, her sagging bosom and her grey hair. Even when she was clothed, he could see her as he had, many times, stark naked, brazenly, repulsively naked, lying on the sand in a small bay where she spent most of the time.

Nobody knew how old she was. Over fifty, for sure. Sixty perhaps? She was Dutch or Belgian. She went off alone every morning and sunbathed naked in her bay.

Sometimes one of the boules players was late for the game in the square. The doctor played there now and again, these days. People knew him. Everyone called him 'doctor'.

'What kept you, Joseph?'

'Just saying hullo to Mémé.'

Because she would pay them fifty francs a time. She had her handbag alongside her, with the money all ready. They went off to screw Mémé, just like that, in the bay, when they were short of fifty francs ...

'What are you thinking about?'

Alfred. Young Alfred, who had failed to return earlier, but was now rushing in through the rain, shaking himself in the corridor and calling

across:

‘Be there in a minute ...’

And the teenager took the stairs four at a time. Why? To change because he was soaked through? The doctor knew there was something else. He was on the point of going upstairs himself, but he stayed where he was, in the dining room, where Eva was going to and fro, serving the dishes.

Fred was nineteen years old. Oddly enough, he didn’t look like his mother, but more like H  l  ne, who was only his aunt. It was disturbing. Isn’t it always disturbing to see a boy who looks like a girl?

He had just finished his first year of law school.

It had made him so tired that there had been some question whether he should continue his studies. His mother was determined he should, because she had a little property and hoped eventually to be able to buy him a solicitor’s practice.

In the mornings, he’d been tagging round after his uncle, full of goodwill and eager to be of service.

‘Here he is, he’s coming down! See?’

Yes, he did see! He saw a certain awkwardness on the face of his nephew, as well as the sparkle of joy in his eyes, which wasn’t caused by the thunderstorm. The boy sat down, stammering:

‘I’m so sorry ...’

And turning to Eva: ‘No soup, thank you.’

Not only had he changed his clothes but he had washed his hands, you could smell the lavender soap. That was already a sign, because usually he didn’t take such care.

And in fact when he met his uncle’s eyes, he blinked two or three times, which clearly meant:

‘Yes! Mission accomplished!’

Then, the doctor’s chest was as if paralysed. He felt almost unable to breathe. And yet he was obliged to smile, look approving. Luckily, everyone was much taken up with the thunderstorm, the lightning flashes in the sky, the pouring rain which even splashed on to their table, and Madame

Harmoniaux eventually had to light the lamps, since it was getting too dark to see.

‘François, don’t you feel well?’

‘I’m perfectly all right,’ he said sharply.

‘But you’re not eating anything.’

‘Oh, if that’s what you want, I’ll eat up!’

And he ate his food, angrily. He was almost at the point of forcing mouthfuls down his throat with his fingers.

It was disgusting. He was furious. He was ashamed. He asked himself, how could he have perpetrated such an action? It was so outrageous that he could still hardly believe it in spite of the evidence, and he would have to wait till he had Alfred to himself.

Because of the rain, the guests were lingering in the dining room after their meal, apart from a few who ventured into the corridor or stood in the doorway watching the rain fall.

‘Are you staying down here?’ Hélène asked, as she went upstairs with Mariette to put the children to bed.

Mariette too was a virgin, he was almost sure of that. She had a fiancé. Next year she wouldn’t be coming with them.

‘I’ll just go over to the Arche with Alfred.’

‘You’ll get soaked!’

Too bad. They ran across. It was only a hundred metres to reach the shelter of the covered terrace of the Arche de Noé, which was crowded.

‘Yes!’ Alfred confirmed as they ran.

And the poor boy, still trembling with emotion, had no idea that his uncle hated him.

How could the doctor have brought himself to act like this? They found seats in an almost dry place near the succulent plants edging the terrace. The doctor ordered spirits for himself, which he did only rarely. His nephew, foolishly, said with a happy grin:

‘Me too! Just this once ...’

He was anxious to tell all. He was still naïve. He wasn’t used to talking about such things, especially with his uncle ... But he had been given such

encouragement.

‘Do you know, I actually saw you, as you went past and when you stood for few moments looking at the house. Actually, that nearly spoilt everything.’

‘How’s that?’ asked the doctor in a blank voice, looking away.

‘I don’t know. She said: “Your uncle!” I think she’s afraid of you. We were almost there and suddenly she didn’t want to. We both watched you going away, and it was back to square one. Well, in the end ... !’

They were talking about Frans’s daughter, and it was the doctor who had, in a manner of speaking, thrown her into the arms of his callow young nephew.

Why, oh Lord, why had he done it? He wanted to bang his head on the wall, because it felt like bursting, as he kept asking himself this stupid question.

Why?

It was certainly stupid. He had never once, himself, spoken to Elisabeth. Not once. He had never had the opportunity.

Already last year, she was much changed. She had still been wearing the red dress, as she was even this year, it was as though the dress was growing with her. And she was still just as thin, but her breasts had formed and now showed through the fabric.

But what was different, and already had been, last year, was her confident air, the impression she gave of being a woman. The doctor had heard the mayor-grocer’s wife murmuring as the girl in red went past holding her little sister’s hand:

‘She’s a proper little mother ...’

The younger girl was clean, and well-kept. So was the house. You could tell from a distance. As for the boy, the young brother, he took the *Cormoran* every morning, a violin case under his arm, because a musician who had settled in Hyères, a famous man apparently, had taken it into his head to teach him the violin.

But what had any of that to do with the doctor? Nothing. Nowadays he had been admitted among the islanders. He was no longer entirely

considered a stranger. Several times, when his local colleague had been ill or away, he had been called upon to treat patients.

People expected him to buy his round of drinks or join in a game of boules.

Every morning, his wife would join the procession, laden with swimming costumes, bathrobes, rubber balls for the children and sandwiches, making its slow way to Silver Beach. She came back at noon, at the same leisurely pace. And left again after lunch. For some time now, the doctor had been accompanying her only rarely, or joining the family for an occasional quick dip.

He had regularly been out fishing with Gène or Polyte, or some of the others. He drank with them in a little café where holidaymakers rarely went. From its doorway, he picked up all the island news.

‘The nuns have taken her in hand.’

Because Elisabeth took the youngest child every morning to the convent school. Then she did her shopping, holding herself very straight in her red dress. She returned home, where she saw to the housework. Her father’s blue trousers were clean and mended. Her brother was as well dressed as any other boy on the island.

‘People say he has a gift for the violin, that he could become a virtuoso.’

Some evenings, when Frans didn’t come home, Elisabeth would walk down to the harbour and calmly go up to her father. The other men would nudge each other.

‘Watch! You must see this!’

And they did see. They saw Frans taking money out of one of his pockets and docilely giving it to his young daughter. She didn’t let him fool her. She insisted. Without gesticulating or shouting. And Frans, shamefaced, would reach into another pocket, where he had kept back some money.

So he never had any left to go off on a spree to Toulon.

‘If his wife, her that died, had acted like that, he’d have let her have it! Once, dunno what she said to him, probably something about money, he knocked her down and pulled her along by the hair. But with his daughter, he never lifts a finger.’

He just tried to cheat. He must have managed it sometimes. They said that he hid money in cracks in the harbour wall, enough to allow him to get drunk once in a while.

He would be back after that, looking ashamed. For the next day or two, he wouldn't dare go up to the house but slept on any boat he could find, or on a public bench, like old Mouchi. And she would come calmly down to find him.

And what in heaven's name did any of that have to do with the doctor? Was he in love? Absolutely not! He certainly couldn't have fallen in love with a little girl, hardly out of childhood, to whom the most he could have done was prescribe her some fortifying medicine.

So why, when he had arrived on the island for the third time, with that lanky half-wit Alfred, a boy with a shadow of down on his upper lip, why had he taken him, as if by chance, up to the army huts?

Alfred painted in watercolours. He carried on his back a pretty varnished wooden box holding his paints, his portfolios and his brushes, and even loaded himself down with a portable easel and folding stool.

At first he had tried to paint the harbour and had taken up his position in the same place as all the visiting painters, with the local kids around him.

'You'd be more peaceful up there.'

The doctor was still not aware of any ulterior motive. He had simply always been attracted by this corner of town, with its cactuses and Barbary figs. It was bad luck that nobody had ever been ill in Frans's household when the regular doctor wasn't available!

Alfred had followed him.

'Look! Those buildings against the umbrella pines.'

'Difficult to paint.'

'All the more reason! Have a go.'

He had sat down alongside Alfred, his eyes fixed on the door, still open, where he sometimes glimpsed a red dress going to and fro in the gloom. He dared not stay all the time. He would go for a stroll and come back.

'You don't have a sweetheart?'

He already felt awkward saying that, but he didn't yet know where it would lead him.

His nephew, blushing, proud to be treated as a man, admitted:

'Yes, there is someone, in Poitiers. But please don't tell my aunt.'

'Of course not. And?'

He didn't put the question any more clearly, but Alfred understood, blushed even deeper and stammered:

'Well, yes, of course ...'

Next morning, Elisabeth was doing the washing outside the building.

'Pretty girl, eh?'

No. Alfred didn't think her pretty. To him, she still looked like a little girl, but he dared not contradict his uncle.

'She's the daughter of Frans, the one who was in the Legion.'

'Oh.'

'I wonder ...'

'What?'

'I wonder if she has any lovers.'

How stupid, how odiously stupid. There he was, an enormous figure with the sun burning his skin, next to another imbecile painting a watercolour in dull, drab shades, and he was getting aroused all by himself at the sight of a red dress with a skinny body inside it, or rather he was trying to arouse his companion.

Because that was where all this was leading. In an underhand way. He couldn't remember ever having acted underhandedly in his life, but this time, he certainly was.

'She keeps looking at you.'

He moved away, that would be better. He wandered off to the harbour, went into Maurice's bar, drank a glass of rosé at the counter. That evening, he asked:

'Did you speak to her?'

'Didn't get a chance.'

And the next day, with an innocent air:

'Going back up there today?'

‘I think so.’

That was the crude truth of it. He was thirty-five, married with a family and he had been amusing himself getting this youngster interested in a girl to whom he had never addressed a single word.

Amusing himself? Not even! Never had he been in such a black mood. Luckily, there was this looming thunderstorm, perpetually threatening, which gave him an excuse. His wife didn’t suspect that he was going more and more often to Maurice’s, where there was already a place reserved for his elbow at the counter.

‘Glass of white, please, Jojo.’

The waitress, an eighteen-year-old, was probably just as desirable as Frans’s daughter, but he didn’t notice that. And anyway, he didn’t desire Elisabeth.

So?

‘You know, uncle, I talked to her ...’

‘I’ve already told you not to call me uncle. It’s ridiculous. Call me François.’

‘I’d feel uncomfortable ...’

‘What did she say?’

‘I asked her to come and have a look at what I’d painted, so she came over ...’

‘Did she like it?’

‘She said there were prettier scenes on the island to paint. So I said ...’

Idiot. Oh God, what an idiot! Of course, the boy had replied that he hadn’t seen anything prettier than her. And the stupid little chicken would have been flattered, puffed up with pride.

‘And what you said to me ... You know ...’

No, he couldn’t remember. What had he said?

‘Whether she had any lovers ... Well, I don’t think so.’

‘You’re just saying that because of her big innocent blue eyes.’

‘No, no, uncle. I tell you, I’m pretty sure.’

What if he were to tell his wife or his sister-in-law, the boy’s mother, who had entrusted her son to them precisely because she was afraid of him



meeting women! – or indeed tell any reasonable man, his friend Péchade, for instance?

Or his mother, who last year, when they had returned from holiday, had looked at him with an expression he well knew, one that had made him blush when he was a boy. It was as if she had guessed everything, when there was nothing to guess.

Because there really wasn't anything! Nothing but some idle remarks one afternoon when it was too hot, when he was feeling irritated for no reason, addressed to his nephew, who was daubing away on paper with his brushes.

And now ...

The rain was stopping already. Some young people had switched on a gramophone and were dancing in the tiny dining room of the Arche. You could hear the rhythm of their steps, and the dripping of water from the eucalyptus trees. They had lit the lamps too early. Now that the sky had cleared there was a misty twilight, full of strong fragrances.

Young fool, rushing to wash his hands! That alone would have been enough to reveal the truth to the doctor. Typical!

*'I was the first, you know!'*

The doctor called back Jojo, who was passing, and ordered another brandy.

*'I don't really know how it happened ... She was on her own ... I went in to ask for a glass of water. Yesterday I'd tried to kiss her. She almost let me, then she ran away. It's very clean inside the house. A bit weird. It doesn't look like any other place I've been into. Are you cross?'*

*'Why on earth would I be cross?'*

*'Don't know ... Just now, when I came back, you looked ...'*

*'Go on, silly.'*

*'Well I kissed her again, and I held her so tightly she couldn't get away. I could see she was looking over my shoulder at the door. She didn't shut her eyes. She just stood still, looking blank. I got panicky.'*

*'Yes.'*

*'She started struggling to pull away from me, and she said:*

*“The doctor!”*

‘Because you were outside, looking at my easel and the paint box. I thought you would guess. But she was trembling with fear. She seemed to think you would come in and be angry ...

“Does he know you’re here?” she said.

‘I said no, and she said: “Go away.” And I thought I *would* go away, because she didn’t want to. Then I grabbed her again, she fell over, and that’s how ...’

The doctor’s gaze had become as opaque as the sky.

‘And well, that was that,’ Alfred concluded.

Mahé made an effort to add in a casual voice:

‘Satisfactory?’

And the other, unconvinced:

‘Yes, uncle.’

‘You did take precautions, didn’t you?’

‘Oh, yes, uncle!’

‘Are you planning to go back tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t know?’

‘I’m a bit scared to. On the way back, I met her father going up. If he’d been a few minutes earlier he’d have caught us.’

There was a silence. The eucalyptus leaves were still dripping, the ice was melting in his glass of brandy and water, couples were dancing, embracing each other tightly, as the cool evening air reached the terrace.

‘And another thing ...’

‘Another thing?’

‘I wonder if she really liked it. Afterwards I got the feeling she hated me. She turned away when I tried to kiss her. “Go now, quickly” was all she said. Nothing else. I turned around on the way out, still hoping she’d make some little sign.’

‘Jojo!’

The teenager looked in astonishment at his uncle, who was ordering his third brandy.

‘I think I’m going to turn in now.’

‘Yes, off you go!’

‘Are you sure you’re not cross?’

‘Of course not, don’t be silly.’

‘Goodnight, uncle.’

And the gangling youth, right there on the terrace, offered his uncle his cheek to kiss, as he’d done as a child.

‘If Auntie asks me ...’

‘Tell her I’ll be back before long.’

But he did not go back. The alcohol made him feel light-headed and his thoughts became thicker and more painful. From time to time, he would repeat in a low voice:

‘What a fool!’

He wanted another drink. He dared not order a fourth glass, so he got up heavily, paid, and made his way to a different bar on the square where he could satisfy his craving at the counter.

All the frogs in creation started making a din. He walked towards the harbour where boats and yachts were moving up and down with the swell, sometimes bumping gently against each other. Elisabeth had fallen. Alfred had said she’d fallen. To the floor. It had happened on the floor. She hadn’t kissed him. She hadn’t said goodbye to him.

He walked on through the sodden dust on the path. And now he was talking to himself, out loud, since he was alone in the night:

‘What a bastard!’

He meant himself. The army huts were two hundred metres ahead of him. They weren’t visible. There was just a darker patch of shadow, without any lights showing. Was she asleep?

Why, oh why had he ... Oh, now that he had been drinking, he understood. It was complicated, but he understood. In the first place, he had perhaps been hoping she wouldn’t give in ...

No! That wasn’t true. He had on the contrary supposed that ... But anyway, if she hadn’t given in, what good would that have done him?

What he had hoped for, what he had wanted, was for her to be soiled, broken.

Then he would be rid of her once and for all, because it couldn't go on like this.

He wasn't even in love, it wasn't that. If he had been in love, the problem would no doubt have been a great deal simpler.

No, it was an obsession, that was the word, a haunting obsession. And it had started that very first day, but faintly, insidiously, like those incurable illnesses that you only become aware of when it is too late for treatment.

It wasn't about a woman, it wasn't about the flesh. It was about two stick-like legs under a scrap of red fabric, a little figure curled up alongside a dead woman in a miserable hovel, two blue eyes, clear and dry; about a kind of doll, stiff-legged and indifferent, who led a small girl by the hand to the nuns, and who went fearlessly up to a man in the harbour to confiscate the money hidden in his pockets.

It was all that and much else, it was the disavowal of his own life, of everything his life had been, the foursquare grey stone house, as tidy as a child's building set, with its box trees trimmed into topiary by his maniacal pre-decessor, the black metal gate, and himself, a fat man of thirty-five – for he was thirty-five now – playing at making his motorbike roar along the country lanes, playing at hunting partridge or rabbit, the disavowal of Saint-Hilaire and the two women sewing for him from morning to night, and telling him when to change his underwear.

It was ... he needed another drink. He had drunk at once too much and too little. It was years since he had been drunk – the last time was during his student days and he had been terribly sick.

He went into a bar where there were no other customers, and the woman behind the counter looked at him with surprise.

'What'll you have, doctor?'

Too bad! Well, let her think what she liked.

'A cognac with water.'

He could feel an unsteadiness which he recognized. He was already drunk. So now he had returned to Porquerolles twice, and this was where it had led him!

And Alfred was fast asleep! He had carefully washed his hands, and the rest. Tomorrow, the doctor was sure, he would avoid going up to the army huts. He was scared to.

‘Same again, Madame Cabrini.’

In the Arche, they were still dancing. Men about to do some night fishing went past with a huge acetylene lamp.

‘Night, doctor!’

And he replied almost gaily:

‘Goodnight!’

This was such madness. He had to fumble to find the front door knob and he made a noise going upstairs. People were asleep behind all those doors.

‘Is that you?’

He felt like answering: ‘No!’

The stage he’d reached now ...



## 5. Péchade's Letter

Bells. Masses of bells plunging into a sky like the sea, making trembling circles there. The circles widened, collided, merged with each other, and then the bells, with the elegance of dolphins, began to plunge again. He frowned and said:

‘There must be some ceremony going on ...’

A funeral? A wedding? He couldn't remember what it was. But he had to go to it. He was walking quickly. His mother was behind him, chivvying him.

‘Hurry up, François,’ she was saying, without seeming to notice that he was naked. And she added this curious sentence:

*‘You’ll miss all the weddings.’*

What weddings was she talking about? His own, or ones he had been invited to?

He was puzzled. His hand, feeling his chest, discovered that he really was naked. The sun was shining through his eyelids. He was lying down. He realized where he was: on the iron bed pulled up close to the window, so that the children's beds could be nearer their mother's. The window was open. Fresh air and sunlight were coming in through the slats of the shutters and streaming over him in his bed. He was also streaming with sweat.

He frowned, because he knew he had something unpleasant to deal with. The first thing he managed to place was the bells: nothing to worry about, it

was just Sunday morning, that was all. He had forgotten it was Sunday.

But why were they whispering in the windowless bedroom where Mariette slept? He listened hard, without opening his eyes, and recognized Hélène's voice.

'Hurry up, Jeanne, you'll make us late for Mass. Mariette, help her do up her shoelaces. She is just as slow every morning.'

All this in hushed, sanctimonious tones.

'Michel, don't make so much noise, you'll wake your father.'

Ah, it was so as not to wake him that they had taken all their things into Mariette's room, and were washing and dressing there. They would have to tiptoe through the main bedroom. It wasn't worth opening his eyes, on the contrary.

He had never been in the habit of sleeping naked. He felt his body, smooth and plump under his hand, and was slightly shocked by it. It was not unpleasant, though. Coming back, he had managed to undress, but not to find his pyjamas, or perhaps he hadn't been able to put them on. Had he switched on the light? He hoped not. He couldn't remember. If only he could be sure he hadn't walked about naked with the lights blazing, between these beds lined up like dominoes, where his daughter Jeanne, for example, might have woken up!

'Jeanne! Prayer book, gloves!'

The door was opening, Hélène was pushing them in front of her. They had their new shoes on, he could hear the soles creaking, and they all smelled of lavender soap. Were they looking at him as they went past?

'Come on.'

Mariette came behind the others. He recognized her smell. Because she had her own personal smell, very different from his wife's.

What was it he had dreamed about weddings? It had just been for a few seconds and he couldn't now remember. But on the other hand, a truth had struck him, as luminous as the window under which he was lying. A truth he had never enquired about or even glimpsed before. All in the time it had taken Hélène to cross the room on tiptoe.

*It wasn't for him that his mother had chosen her – he was thinking of Hélène, of course – it was for herself.* He felt no anger about it. The door closed. On the stairs, they were already speaking a little more loudly. Then, when they reached the road, they were talking in normal voices. His wife was saying:

‘Hold Michel’s hand, Mariette. He’s deliberately dragging his feet to get dust on his shoes.’

Yes! His mother had chosen her for her own personal convenience, and when you thought about it in a detached way, you realized the difficulties she must have had to overcome. It was almost a miracle that she had found the right person.

Another woman would have taken up more space in the house, would have wanted to take charge of this and that. Another woman would in any case have kept her husband busy.

But not Hélène. She had come to the grey house with the black railing round it as if entering a convent. Exactly the same way. She’d obeyed all the rules, without ever trying to change a single one.

So that for his mother, life had gone on as usual, with the advantage that she need no longer feel afraid. Before Hélène, she had been worried that her son might do something stupid, catch a shameful disease, despite being a doctor, or worse, that he might father a child on some unsuitable girl, whom he would then have to marry, or whose parents would insist on asking for a lot of money.

Hélène helped his mother to look after him, not because she loved him, but because he was the master of the house, because that was the rule, you had to look after the master of the house, the breadwinner.

She was a mild woman. Oh, she didn’t have her equal for mildness. Just to see the way she had ushered the children through the room on the way to Mass ...

And later on, she wouldn’t dare say a word to him. At most – he knew her: he had never known her so well as this morning – she would murmur with her timid little smile:

‘You haven’t got too much of a headache?’



Best not to move. If he kept still, he felt fine. He was sweating. He was beginning to sweat all the alcohol out of his body, drop by drop, and it was far from unpleasant, it was almost pleasurable. Nor was he upset to be thinking what he now thought, to be passing judgement on them all of a sudden, his mother and his wife, with calm lucidity.

They had imprisoned him, without appearing to, all the while seeming as if they were waiting on him hand and foot, and he, poor fool, had never noticed it.

That was why they hated Porquerolles. His mother would not for any price have left her house at Saint-Hilaire during the holidays. Not to mention that it was the season for stripping beans and bottling fruit. When they went to the Le Guens' boarding house, she was happy. She had him on the end of a leading rein.

But here, she sensed that H  l  ne wasn't capable of keeping a proper watch on him. She had tried various roundabout ways to stop them coming here for the third year. And if they had saddled him with Alfred, it was to keep him occupied, to supervise him indirectly.

He wasn't yet thinking about whether he would continue to allow this to happen. It was already a giant step to have discovered what was going on, and to contemplate it calmly.

Ach! He had moved in bed and felt as if liquid were swilling from one side of his head to the other. He could hear people at breakfast downstairs. Old folk, mainly. The Pension Saint-Charles specialized in elderly couples and aged bachelors surviving on their own.

The postman. He heard his footsteps stopping at the front door and his voice calling:

'Post!'

Eva replied from inside the house:

'Coming!'

Would there be a letter for him? Perhaps. And perhaps Eva would bring it upstairs to him.

And at once lubricious thoughts flew into his head.

Not ordinary male desire. Dirtier thoughts, the kind he had had when he was at boarding school and couldn't sleep. For instance, he tried to imagine Mémé stretched out on the sand, her flesh a violet colour, when the local men went with her for fifty francs.

He sniffed the odour of his own body. He was pleased to be naked under the sheets. He listened. Someone was coming upstairs. Eva. She knocked at the door of the next room.

‘A letter for you, Mademoiselle Dorchon.’

Now she was approaching his door. She knocked.

‘Come in.’

He opened his eyes at last in the sunlit bedroom, with the white of the unmade beds, the dazzling white of the walls and ceiling, the white shade on the lamp hanging from a wire. Eva too wore a white apron over her black dress. She seemed surprised to find him still in bed, and alone.

She wasn't scared. She was only nineteen, but a man didn't frighten her. In any case, she expected the occasional approach.

‘Let's have it, my dear.’

She would have to move nearer the bed, and he had already prepared his strategy. He had deliberately let one arm trail on the floor. So that when she came close, he slid his hand up her bare leg and under her dress.

He felt no desire for Eva. She was a fat girl, with solid flesh, as muscular as a man. With his other hand, he had grabbed the maid's hand, and slipped it, with some force, under the sheet.

All she could find to say was:

‘You're not serious, sir!’

Their pose was ridiculous and uncomfortable for both of them. It meant nothing, could lead nowhere. He was disappointed. She objected:

‘Look, the door's open, anyone could come past ...’

‘Off you go.’

He waited for her to leave before sitting up in bed and retrieving the letter, which she had dropped on the floor. His head was aching again. Yet he was pleased – relieved, as it were – to have behaved as he had. It was a

sort of revenge. Against whom? He didn't know and didn't try to explore that.

Oh! The letter was from his friend Péchade, who had been unable to find a locum to take his place, and consequently was unable to take a holiday. He had sent his wife and children to Les Sables d'Olonne, and went to join them on Sundays.

*My dear François ...*

Péchade's handwriting was not the usual doctor's scrawl, he had a round, regular hand, like a quartermaster or a postal clerk. A good fellow. Always off sick though, if it wasn't his kidneys it was his liver or some other organ. And there was forever someone ill in that house. He had become so used to it that he didn't complain, even found it normal. Recently, an X-ray had revealed a shadow at the top of his oldest boy's lung. He had taken him to Nantes for a pneumothorax operation, and intended to send him to a sanatorium in the mountains for the winter.

The *Cormoran* was pulling into port with its Sunday load, a crowd packed together so tightly that you feared a whole row of people would fall into the water whenever the boat tilted slightly. Silver Beach would be heaving. It would be impossible to find their usual place. On such days, Hélène twitched her head about like a worried bird or a mother hen, because of the couples coming over from Toulon, who were not circumspect enough in their behaviour in front of the children.

*My dear François,*

*I hesitated greatly to bother you on holiday, but in the end I think it is my duty to warn you ...*

That was Péchade all over. Honest and conscientious. But what was the matter this time?

*The other day when I went over to your place to pick up the eel-nets you said I could borrow, your mother asked me to stay for a moment, and I could see straight away that she was worried.*

*Above all, she said to me, don't tell my son, he'll only get ideas.*

*And she admitted that for a long time now she'd had a pain in her side.*

*How long? I asked her.*

*Oh, for years, maybe five years, I've had this little thing on my chest. I would have asked François about it. But you know how he is, he'd panic.*

What an idea! He, who was serenity incarnate!

*Finally, after a lot of beating about the bush, she admitted she had a small lump on her right breast. At first she'd thought it was a mosquito bite that she must have scratched in her sleep so that it had become infected. Then as it got bigger instead of going away, she thought it was eczema.*

*'That's why I stopped eating fish,' she told me. It took some time before I could get her to show me her breast. You know her better than me. She told me she could never have undressed in front of you.*

*And that's how it is, my dear François, I'm getting to the most delicate part. I don't want to take responsibility for a definite diagnosis. You may guess what I immediately thought. In my view, she should be taken as soon as possible to our old teacher, Charbonneau.*

*I'm sure she is in more pain than she will admit to. The way she spoke, I would imagine that she too has thought in terms of cancer. She's distressed. She wants to have it treated, but without putting anyone out.*

*It's up to you to decide what you should do. I hope you will forgive me for writing to you so frankly. I'd noticed for a while that your mother was losing weight, but I just put it down to her age. And the kind of clothes she wears makes it hard to judge anyway. I was horrified to find that her chest was so thin and that she had an ulcer as big as a five-franc coin.*

A large tear fell on the letter and smudged the ink. It wasn't sweat. The doctor could no longer read the lines which danced in front of his eyes in the sun.

Coming out of Mass, his wife gave a start when she found him standing in the square. It was all the more unexpected as he was wearing a city suit with collar and tie and his dark felt hat.

He hardly noticed a red dress and a flash of blonde hair in the sunshine: Elisabeth, who was also coming out of Mass with the other Children of Mary, holding her little sister's hand.

'What is it, François?'

'Bad news about my mother. A letter from Péchade. She consulted him and he is afraid it's serious. I'm going home at once.'

'You're going back to Saint-Hilaire?'

‘I’m taking the *Cormoran* in half an hour. I’ve already telephoned ahead to La Tour-Fondue for them to have my car ready. I’ll come back to fetch you and the children, or you can come back by train at the end of the holidays.’

‘We’re coming with you.’

He had foreseen it. This was bound to happen. The idea of packing them all up, taking the whole family back in the car, exhausted him in advance.

‘No, you won’t have time to get everything ready. And the children need ...’

‘No, no, you know perfectly well they prefer it at home. Hurry up, Mariette! Give the children something to eat. We’re leaving!’

‘Today?’

‘At once. You pay the bill, François, I’ll go upstairs.’

‘You haven’t had any breakfast ...’

‘Never mind. It won’t hurt this once.’

‘What about Alfred?’

‘We can take him with us. If we all squeeze up.’

‘No.’

Then he had a thought. He said:

‘Oh well, if you insist ...’

‘Unless he prefers to stay ...’

‘No, he can come with us.’

He didn’t want to leave his nephew alone on the island. The young man was still asleep when Mahé pushed open his bedroom door. He usually went to the later Mass. Seeing him lying there, his hair ruffled, his mouth open, the doctor detested him.

‘Get up! We’re leaving. My mother is ill.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘I don’t know. We’re leaving in half an hour.’

He felt delivered of a great weight. The idea that his mother was probably suffering from cancer distressed him, but Péchade’s letter nevertheless had something miraculous about it.

He bustled about, paid Madame Harmoniaux, who felt obliged to commiserate and tell him stories about people with cancer, and gave a tip to Eva, who disgusted him. From time to time, as he spoke to someone, a glistening teardrop escaped from his eyelashes.

What struck him hardest, what filled him with an emotion he had not felt since childhood, was the word ‘breast’.

Because with that, his mother became a woman again. And that breast, now undermined by ruin, had no doubt been bruised by him when he was a baby. How many times had he heard his aunts say, when they were discussing infants:

‘Not like François – he was still taking the breast at two years old!’

He was the guilty one, and his mother was no longer a rather dried-up old lady in grey or black, a person who trotted round the house or sat sewing in the window, but a woman with fragile internal organs.

The island was as hot as a furnace that morning. Under his heavy suit, his shirt clung to his skin. He had found a handcart – the same cart belonging to the grocer-mayor – to carry their luggage. The *Cormoran* had started its engines. They were waiting for the children, who were always slow, with Mariette chivvying them.

‘Do you think it is so very serious?’ Hélène asked, seeking to reassure him.

What was the point of answering? His mother had breast cancer. For years she had said nothing. Nobody had suspected that under her severe blouses, under the cameo brooch which she wore only on Sundays, the cruel thing was developing, gnawing at her flesh.

He could see again with hallucinating clarity a page from one of his student textbooks, Ambroise Paré’s interpretation of cancer: a kind of crab with hairy pincers.

The clear water flowed past the white hull of the ferry. The seaweed at the bottom of the sea seemed to sway under the boat’s passage. They were almost alone making the return trip. As they neared La Tour-Fondue, they could see a dense crowd waiting their turn to go over to the island.

Then he made a vow, moving his lips, looking out to sea so that no one could notice him talking to himself:

‘Dear God, if my mother gets better I swear I’ll never, ever, come back to Porquerolles, I swear ...’

There were no words to express what he was thinking. It was vague. A whole procession of ideas, feelings, sentiments.

‘Please, God, you know what I mean.’

And he was relieved. He had to see to filling up the car with petrol, checking the oil, loading the luggage. The vehicle was full to bursting and the heat unbearable. Because of the children, they couldn’t drive all night, so they slept overnight in Toulouse. They stopped for a barely edible meal somewhere, on a terrace under a red and yellow awning. The doctor felt as though his head was being squeezed inside a helmet.

They were given a room with a double bed, so he was alongside his wife again.

‘Please God, I promise ...’

‘Are you crying, François?’

‘No.’

He was sniffing, it was true, but he was not weeping. At six in the morning, he was up, the car was out of the garage, and he was pacing about in the empty streets watching the trams going past.

‘What are you going to say to her?’

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.’

He avoided speaking to Alfred, or if he did say anything, it was to snap at him.

‘Do watch what you say, François. He’s wondering what you’ve got against him. I can see he’s upset ...’

And what about him?

The landscape was becoming more familiar. Then they recognized villages, houses, they started to see the names of Mahé and Lansquet and other local families on notices.

‘You don’t want to stop off at the Péchades?’

They did stop, but there was no one home but the maid, Péchade was on his rounds.

‘Tell him we’re back, and I’ll phone him presently.’

The houses were grey, the roofs of black slate, it was impossible to imagine that in another place there were houses painted in pastel shades, pink or light blue, or pale green, like women’s dresses. Here in Saint-Hilaire, people would find shocking the idea that men might walk about barefoot in espadrilles, their shirts open-necked to show their sunburnt chests, while the women, mothers even, paraded in shorts, with their children, heading for Silver Beach where they would spend their day stretched out on the sand. You often saw women lying on their fronts, pulling their bathing costumes down so far that the soft white shape of their breasts was visible.

His mother’s breast ...

His heart beat faster as the house came into view, he looked up at all the windows, which were open, but it was in the garden that he caught sight of the familiar silhouette, under a large black straw hat. His mother was stripping beans. It had rained, because the earth looked dark and the sun was a washed-out yellow after the rain. She was looking in astonishment at the car, which she did not at first recognize, then she saw him, jumping out, pushing past the gate and running clumsily towards her.

‘François!’ she said, in the tone of voice she used when she had something to reproach him with.

‘Mother!’

He had sworn not to cry, to stay calm, to make light of things, but he lost control, his heart was bursting, he didn’t wait to lead his mother inside the house, but embraced her awkwardly, repeating:

‘Mother!’

He swallowed his saliva.

‘What is it? What’s happened?’

How could he explain it to her? It went well beyond the cancer. Just yesterday, yes, yesterday morning, he had been lying in bed, naked, sweating, full of lustful thoughts behind the baking-hot shutters.



Well! That was all over now. Here he was, back home. He was amazed, in this little garden, to find he had become taller, stronger, more solid. He would soon put on his breeches and his boots. His nostrils could already detect the slightly old-fashioned smell of the house.

‘I know, Péchade wrote to you. When I expressly forbade him to. All this fuss about nothing. And the children! You’ve brought the children back! And poor Alfred, who was so glad to be spending a month in Porquerolles!’

The others had spilled out of the car. The children kissed their grandmother. Mariette was already unloading the lighter pieces of luggage and opening the door of the kitchen, where the gas was lit and the kettle singing.

‘Yes, I’m sure it’s nothing, mother, but the best thing is to go and see Charbonneau. And then we’ll all feel better.’

‘If I’d known ...’

He went upstairs to change his clothes and stood still a moment staring at his socks, from which a trail of fine sand fell. He could hear doors being opened and windows closed. He went into his surgery and asked for Charbonneau’s number.

‘Yes, professor ... Tomorrow morning? Yes ... Many thanks. So we’ll set off this evening, I expect, and spend the night in Poitiers.’

Charbonneau was due to go on holiday himself the next morning at nine o’clock. Because Mahé had been a pupil of his, he agreed to see him before leaving.

His mother had not been away from the house in years. They heard her coming and going for hours, terrified of the trip, and giving fussy instructions to Mariette, to her daughter-in-law and to old Guérin, who looked after the garden.

‘If only I’d known,’ she kept on saying. ‘Turning everything upside down like this, it’s as bad as moving house!’

Finally, at five o’clock, she was seated in the car, alongside her son.

‘Why didn’t you ever tell me you were in pain?’

‘Because we women are used to it. Don’t drive so fast ... You know I’m scared of having an accident.’

They took two rooms at the hotel. She refused absolutely to eat in the restaurant, because she had brought her own provisions.

‘Go and have dinner, go on. Don’t worry about me.’

He could hardly recognize her in the ordinary hotel room, where she looked around at the dust in despair. She seemed smaller, older, more fragile. He was seeing her at last as other people might see her, not as one sees one’s own mother.

‘I’ll go and get something to eat, and I’ll be right back,’ he said, feeling ashamed.

He really needed to get outside, to see people coming and going. Fatigue and emotions had set his nerves on edge. He drank some wine, half a bottle perhaps, and felt it going to his head.

When he went to bid her goodnight, he found she had brought a set of sheets both for herself and for him, since she didn’t trust the doubtful linen of a hotel bedroom. She had also brought her kitchen alarm clock, whose ticking he recognized.

‘Don’t go getting up too early. Charbonneau is only expecting us at eight.’

She had brought with her her best underwear, which she hadn’t worn for the best part of twenty years.

‘Don’t worry about me, go to sleep.’

She woke him in the morning, bringing him his coffee. She was up and ready. She was wearing the black dress she had had made some years earlier for a wedding, and he noticed that she was wearing her jewellery. He was so touched by this that he cut himself shaving and it took a long time to stop the bleeding.

‘Right, let’s go.’

‘You will let me see him on my own, won’t you? Promise! Otherwise, I won’t go ...’

‘Of course, mother.’

They were ushered into a sitting room, where the furniture had been covered in dustsheets. In the hall, luggage was piled up, including golf clubs, and people could be heard moving about noisily upstairs.

They sat silently, facing each other, perhaps equally impressed. Charbonneau came in. He was a very large man, with thinning hair and a grey goatee. His whole demeanour conveyed reassuring calm.

‘Forgive me for asking you to come so early, but we’re catching a train to the Pyrenees, where we go every year ...’

He pushed open the padded door to his consulting room.

‘If you would be so good as to come in here.’

He was expecting his colleague to come in as well, but Mahé remained standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. The professor understood, and closed the door, and after that Mahé only heard distant whispers, the kind you hear coming from a confessional. A few footsteps from time to time. Then the metallic sound of medical instruments being handled.

A boy of about fifteen rushed into the room, stopped short and went out again stammering apologies when he saw someone there. A car drew up at the front door and people started loading luggage.

Mahé was damp with sweat, and yet he didn’t feel warm. His palms were moist. He concentrated on the bronze bust of Charbonneau on the mantelpiece, and on a large oil painting of a young woman in evening dress on the opposite wall.

And still the voices from the next room. Sometimes long silences. Finally, the padded door opened. His mother’s face gave nothing away. But her cheeks were a little pinker than usual – embarrassment, no doubt, at having had to undress.

Mahé’s eyes searched for Charbonneau’s. There was no need for words to be exchanged. In any case, he already knew. The miracle hadn’t happened. A simple movement of the other man’s eyelids, a blink which signified:

‘Yes, of course, that’s what it is.’

But the professor said out loud:

‘As I’ve just told your mother, I’ll need to see her again to make a categorical diagnosis. I’ll be back in three weeks. I’ll write and give you an appointment. And meantime, she shouldn’t worry, and she should tell

herself that even if this is a cancer, which is not at all certain, these days we have very effective ways of fighting it ...'

She smiled, the most pathetic smile he had seen in his life, and fearing he was about to burst into tears himself, he turned to the window.

'We're holding you up, professor.'

She trotted along the street beside him. He repeated to her Charbonneau's sentence, the famous sentence which the patient was often to hear from her family.

They had to pick up their luggage from the hotel. His mother insisted on changing her clothes, because she didn't want to return to Saint-Hilaire in her Sunday best.

And while she was getting dressed in the other room, he found himself thinking quite calmly and lucidly, in the midst of his emotion:

'Since my prayer hasn't been answered, my vow doesn't have to be kept.'



## 6. The Burial at Saint-Hilaire

She insisted on having her own way until the very end. During the last days, although she had become terrifyingly thin, they couldn't keep her in bed. As soon as their backs were turned, she was up and poking about all over the house, engaged on mysterious errands. She made so little noise that other members of the household were surprised to find her behind them, or emerging from a closet. She would put a finger to her lips, like a child caught out being naughty.

'Hush! Don't tell François!'

It was April. In the autumn, the gardener had planted a large strawberry bed, and she had said to him:

'I don't think I'll be eating any of these, Guérin ...'

He was fifteen years older than her, and still looked after all the gardens in the village. He could remember back when she was a little girl, the day he had been called up for military service and had gone with his age group to be offered drinks in every house: she had put a gold coin into the collection. She said it wasn't true, that the old man was inventing memories.

They often surprised her writing in a little notebook which she took great care not to leave lying about. But it was in the linen cupboards that she spent most of her time, as if she wanted to compose an inventory.

They joked about that, without suspecting that it was the truth.

For the previous two months, she had refused to contemplate an operation, even when Professor Charbonneau had come in person from Poitiers to persuade her.

‘Why put me through all that, when there’s nothing to be done?’

But it was precisely because the disease was terminal that it was thought necessary to try the operation. They wove a veritable conspiracy around her. Dr Péchade was in on it, of course, and the whole family, their friends, and any local people who called to see her. They were told about it. She knew. She would see them come in and as soon as they opened their mouths:

‘Get along with you, I know what you’re going to say.’

Everyone had an uncle, aunt, sister-in-law or cousin whose life had been saved by an operation in a much more serious case.

In the end, she gave in.

‘Just to have a bit of peace!’ she sighed.

She was certainly in great pain. But when it came to arranging the trip to hospital, they met fresh resistance, more determination than ever. In this struggle, she truly exhausted the remains of her strength.

She clung on to the house and they were obliged to look away, during the last days, as they saw her staring hard at the walls, the ornaments, the familiar furniture. From cellar to attic, into every nook and cranny, she trotted round as if making a kind of mournful pilgrimage, giving a start and looking embarrassed if she was caught unawares, pretending to be searching for something, inventing some final excuses.

On the day before she was due to leave, Madame Papin turned up, and it was a shock for Hélène, who was in the house and opened the door to her. A little old woman, thin and white-haired, whose speciality was laying out the dead, not as a professional career but because she had chosen it. She was comfortably off. She lived alone in a house which no one was ever invited to enter. She claimed that she never slept. The grocer’s wife said that at any rate she didn’t eat much, since she bought hardly anything, and only in tiny quantities, ‘as if for a bird’.

As soon as one of the local people was known to be dying, she would come running and would wait, indifferent to any cold-shouldering,



‘My turn, is it?’ his mother asked, with a pale smile.

They had brought a famous surgeon down from Paris. Charbonneau and Péchade were to assist him. The doctor saw them one last time, when they were already gowned up, with their surgical gloves and masks.

He went to sit on a chair in the immaculate corridor where the sun was streaming in. A few times, he approached the door, but could hear nothing. An hour went by. Then almost another hour, and he knew this for a bad sign.

Finally the door opened, and the sinister little trolley covered with a sheet was wheeled out by a nurse. Péchade came up to him looking sad and serious.

‘Well?’

‘No, not yet ...’

‘Is there any hope?’

Péchade could only raise his eyes to heaven. She had been unable to withstand the shock of the operation. An hour later, it was all over, without her having regained consciousness. The nuns were preparing her for burial when the doctor heard raised voices in the corridor.

It was Madame Papin, carrying a suitcase, and demanding to be allowed in.

‘Please tell them, Monsieur François, that it was your mother herself who asked me to come. And I’ve brought all the things she told me to.’

He nodded, without being able to speak. And Madame Papin remained a long time in the room with one of the sisters.

That night, the body was brought back to Saint-Hilaire, as Madame Mahé had foreseen. The old Papin woman swelled with importance.

‘Now, Monsieur François, she told me you are not to do anything before looking in the notebook under a pile of linen in the chest ...’

And it was only then that they realized how carefully the dying woman had taken care of every detail. Down to where to find the candles, or which candlesticks to use for the wake – the two silver ones from the sitting room.

There was a complete inventory of the contents of every piece of furniture in the house, and she had thought of everyone, made small



legacies to each of them, including distant female relations they hadn't seen for twenty years. They also found a list of people to be informed, instructions for the notary. She had remembered about inheritance tax, and taken measures to reduce it to a minimum.

It was a magnificent funeral. The whole of Saint-Hilaire turned out, as well as people from neighbouring villages, and even from Bressuire and Cholet. They came in cars and on bicycles. From the next village, where there was a railway station, they came on foot and formed a long line walking along the road, wet after a recent shower.

The doctor's eyes were red-rimmed, and it was as if he could hardly see, since he bumped into things, shook hands with mourners without seeming to recognize them, stammering automatically:

'Thank you ... thank you.'

Following his mother's instructions, he had ordered a meal for close on a hundred people at the inn, fifty metres from the house.

And that night, when bottle after bottle had been emptied, everyone agreed that they had never seen such a successful funeral in the region.

He went on doing his rounds to the farms on his motorbike. On market days, he saw patients in his surgery and the waiting-room queue spilled out into the garden. Péchade tried to distract him, and invited him over with his wife and children every Sunday.

He was grateful to his friend, certainly. All the more so since Péchade, being in poor health himself and rather gloomy by nature, had to make an effort to try to cheer people up in conversation.

Always these days, the doctor saw him as he had that one sultry afternoon in the garden, with grey stubble on his cheeks, the right one fleshier than the left, and that mouth which kept moving.

They had been as close as friends could be. He had no criticism to make of Péchade at all, on the contrary, since his friend had devoted himself to him as no one in the immediate family would have done, neglecting his patients and his own family, to be on hand whenever he was needed.

It was not his friend's fault that the bond had broken. He went regularly to Péchade's house. As he arrived, he would smell food cooking. The children would be sent out of doors. The adults would sit in the sun, by the window, and he would be exhausted at once by the chatter that would begin, words falling like monotonous and endless rain, as he watched the women whispering in a corner, showing each other some needlework, or patterns for a frock that they planned to have made up by a little dressmaker they had discovered.

He would eat without appetite. He felt heavy, clumsy, as he looked at the children: Péchade's three boys, the image of their father, so much so that it was almost caricatural, his own daughter Jeanne, almost ten years old, and his little boy who was just starting school.

It was his daughter who looked most like him. When she was little, with her ringlets and big eyes, she had been pretty, but now one could already see some inborn vulgarity. It must come from her grandfather, the famous Mahé who had tried to carry his mare on his shoulders when he had had too much to drink, and had died of it.

Her skin was coarse-grained, her face too wide, her mouth without shape.

He felt no disappointment. He didn't feel anything. Everything around him left him quite cold.

As for his son, you sometimes wanted to shake him to see if he could act like a normal boy, he was so quiet. He had the mildness of his mother, her calm and resigned expression. No, it wasn't even resignation. He couldn't see far enough ahead for that. He would stay where you put him and could keep himself amused for hours on end with some simple object, an old box, a piece of metal, a handful of rags, just as Hélène could sit by the window for hours sewing.

The very week of the funeral, only three days later, Mariette had got married. They were all shocked. They had imagined that since she had lived with them for four years – she was very young when she had been hired – she would share in the family mourning. But they were now discovering a new Mariette, a Mariette with a life plan laid out inside that little round head, a plan which she meant to put into practice.

‘You must understand, the wedding’s all fixed, my fiancé’s waiting, we’ve got relations in Paris who asked long ago for time off work so that they could come. I wasn’t to know that madame would choose this week to die.’

So in the midst of their distress, they had to train a new maid, a girl who was brought up on a farm and broke everything she touched. She was a stolid, stiff kind of girl, with frightened eyes. She trembled if you asked her for anything and looked at you as if to say:

‘Do you think I can manage?’

It wasn’t too important, obviously, since Hélène was taking care of the housekeeping. She had been doing so before, but then she had had her mother-in-law beside her.

Suddenly she seemed to look insignificant in a house that had become too big for her. At times she went endlessly to and fro, as if she had lost something. At table, in the dining room which looked on to the terrace, the gap was more perceptible than ever. In the early days, the doctor was unable to eat. Even without looking at his mother’s place, he would feel unwell, and many times he had to get up and go out before the end of the meal.

Everything got on his nerves.

‘You should be more patient with the children, François. They can’t help it.’

And he asked himself, yes, he asked himself what right she had to speak like that, what right she had even to be there at all ...

During his mother’s lifetime, he had grown used to seeing her round the house, because she had only held a subordinate position.

He had been right, in Porquerolles, when he had discovered that his mother had chosen Hélène for her own benefit, not his.

And now? Now that his mother was no longer there?

He was afraid of letting his indifference show and causing her pain, since really she was blameless. It was simply stronger than him. The greater the effort he made, the more irritated he became at any contact with her.

He knew that she talked about him with the Péchades. He had not overheard any conversation, but he could guess at it from certain words,

details or advice he heard from his friend.

‘François needs distractions ... I don’t know what to do,’ she must have said to them.

First, Péchade had tried to drag him off to a medical conference in Paris. He had refused. He had no wish to go to Paris, or to be distracted.

Life had lost its savour, that was all. He was like an old man whose appetite has gone. Medicines won’t help him get it back again. There are deeper causes, and it was precisely those causes that he did not wish to recognize.

‘Why not come out and try to catch a few crayfish?’

‘It’s too early ...’

‘Yesterday Agat caught a three-pound pike.’

Why couldn’t they just leave him in peace? Didn’t they realize how crude and clumsy they were being? They were only making worse the emptiness he felt all round him.

It wasn’t just since his mother’s death. He was thirty-five years old now. Until this point, one could almost say that other people had been living his life for him.

He had been turned into a doctor. He had obediently studied everything they put in front of him. Then he had allowed himself to be enclosed in this grey house, which they wanted him to think was now his.

He hadn’t reacted, he’d played uncomplainingly with all the toys they suggested, he’d gone hunting and fishing, he’d learned bridge to make Péchade happy.

People had kept telling him:

‘This is your church ... your village, your friends ...’

To prove it to him, they had written his surname up on all those shop fronts.

And one fine day, he didn’t exactly know when, and didn’t want to know, he’d discovered it wasn’t true, just as a child, at a certain age, discovers that his aunts and uncles, whom he’s been taught to kiss when he sees them, mean nothing to him.

He found that at thirty-five, here he was, too big, too fat, too full of rather vulgar life, with a wife and two children and an existence all laid out for him, a fixed schedule worked out for every day of the week.

He followed it. He made a big effort to follow it, because he could see no other solution, because he refused to admit there could be one, but he was floating inside this world that had been arranged for him as if inside a suit of clothes that didn't fit.

One evening, as he was going to bed, his wife said to him, in a good-humoured tone meant to cancel out the reproach concealed in her words:

‘You haven't been drinking this afternoon, have you?’

He lied to her in reply:

‘Just a glass at the Bertauts’.

It wasn't true. He had visited the farm: a labourer had fallen from a ladder. Normally he never accepted a drink from his patients, since, as he told them, if he drank a glass in every house, he wouldn't get to the end of the day. They all knew this so well that even when the other men were drinking, they would say:

‘Not for you, eh, doctor?’

He had drunk three glasses at the Bertauts'. The day before he had had a drink with a farmer who had been drawing wine from his cask.

His wife could detect it on his breath. And that too was inadmissible: that he should be condemned his whole life long to sleep in the same bed as her! He had never been able to accustom himself to her smell, which was bland. He didn't like the feel on the pillow of her hair, which she insisted on keeping long. He didn't like to see her legs at bedtime: too white, with the veins already showing blue, on their way to becoming varicose.

Especially when he had had a few drinks here and there, it seemed to him that he had been tricked, that from the start an obscure conspiracy had been woven round him.

It even extended to the furniture! It had belonged to his mother, and some of it dated back to his grandmother: he had been seeing these pieces of furniture all his life. They had their own special names. They would say: ‘grandma's chest of drawers’ or ‘the good sideboard’. It was the same with

the cameo brooch that H       had inherited and wore on Sundays, which also came from a grandmother he had never seen. It was as if all this was arranged round him as if to imprison him inside a holy circle, within a boundary he could never cross.

The moment he came in, they would make the children be quiet, lay the table immediately, clear away any objects around the room.

‘Quick, Jeanne. Your father’s home.’

And Jeanne would close her school books.

‘Quick, Marie’ – the new maid – ‘I can hear Monsieur’s bike.’

And Marie, flustered, would drop whatever she was holding.

They made a great play of treating him as the head of the family. But he saw in this concerted attitude a way of enslaving him even more.

In what way was he the head? What freedom, what kind of freedom, did he have?

Who knows? He was beginning to wonder whether the same had been true for his father, the famous Mah  , for all that he was two metres tall and weighed a hundred and twenty kilos. Perhaps when, after a few drinks, he had taken on the other stock dealers, it was just a way – a poor effort – to convince himself that he was worth something.

Sunday succeeded Sunday. The P         would come in turn to have lunch and tea at Saint-Hilaire. Everyone noticed that he was the first to go and fetch the cognac bottle from the cupboard and that he helped himself to several glasses.

It was Madame P       who put her foot in it one Sunday. Not only by pronouncing the taboo word, but then, as soon as it escaped her lips, by blushing and looking round as if to apologize.

She had simply said, in her pleasant and stupid way:

‘Will you be going to Porquerolles this year?’

It was too late to take the words back. H       felt the immediate need to busy herself with the children. P       lit a cigarette. Everyone waited.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ he said.

But he was sure. And this time it was far more serious than the other years. Not only would he go, but he knew what he was going to look for

there.

‘Do you think the climate in the south is good for the children?’

Poor Péchade!

‘No reason it shouldn’t be.’

And perhaps to try to redeem herself a little, Madame Péchade hastened to say:

‘Hélène was telling me she was getting used to it.’

‘Of course. She’ll get used to it.’

Without meaning to, he pronounced the last words like a verdict, with arrogant indifference. She’d get used to it, or not. Too bad for her.

Had anyone ever asked him if he would get used to her? Had anyone worried so much about turning him into a country doctor, and then a married man and a father?

That was life.

If you admitted that, you would have to admit that there might be other lives; and he was thirty-five years old, and believed he now had the right to follow his own path, not that of other people any more.

He didn’t feel resentment towards his mother. Or towards Hélène, when he thought about it calmly. He would have been inclined, if anything, to feel sorry for her. It wasn’t her fault either. He tried to ration his moments of ill humour, and certain gestures, words and expressions, which, he knew, did not pass unnoticed by his wife.

She was not particularly intelligent, but a woman always notices those little things.

‘Will you go fishing there?’

They had to talk about it, now that the subject had been raised.

‘Yes ... I do sometimes go fishing.’

‘Do you go swimming?’

‘Yes, that too.’

He would have found it hard to say exactly what he did there, what was attracting him. And anyway they wouldn’t have understood.

He could have drawn a comparison. Here, every morning as he shaved, he could see from his window teams of huge oxen, bowing their heads

under the yoke as they moved towards the fields, pacing so slowly that it seemed they were measuring eternity.

There, leaning over the sea, he could watch strange combats, a perpetual life-and-death struggle: behind every rock or clump of seaweed, fish with aggressive shapes were lying in wait for others, and the very flowers that opened underwater were on the lookout for prey to imprison in their tentacles.

Here, men drained the life out of day after day, with tasks that followed the inexorable rhythm of the ploughman's almanac.

There ...

But why talk about it? Why was this circle being formed round him, made up of anxious looks?

As soon as his back was turned, they must be whispering:

'His mother's death gave him a terrible shock. He's a changed man. Have you noticed he's started to drink ...?'

Because he was trying to escape from the circle, quite simply. He was a Mahé. And because they were Mahés, and because these other Mahés whom he didn't know were embedded throughout the region, they were all linking up to prevent him from escaping.

So he pulled in his broad shoulders, glowered, and regarded the whole lot of them as enemies, including Péchade.

That's how it was. And it wasn't his fault. And they needn't think they'd win! They'd never be able to hold him back. On the contrary! Their resistance spurred him on, as did the puny little conspiracies they were plotting around him.

He'd go to Porquerolles. And not only would he go, but he felt that it wouldn't stop there. He was patient. Perhaps because, in spite of everything, he *was* a Mahé, a man from here.

For four years now, it had been constantly on his mind, and he had not yet broken out, but had contented himself with ruminating a vague idea which was gradually turning into a plan.

One fine day, he would wake up in the morning and find himself in possession of a worked out idea, a fully formed project, and woe betide



anyone who tried to deter him from putting it into practice.

The people in Porquerolles were beginning to get used to him. He had had occasion to treat them. He had made the acquaintance of his colleague on the island, Dr Lepage. A pale-faced little man, who had accepted the post because he had a weak chest.

‘You must understand,’ he had explained to Mahé, ‘to live here, you don’t want to be ambitious. In winter, there are only about four hundred residents, and few of them are ever ill. If the Cooperative didn’t pay me a stipend to make sure there’s a doctor on the island, I’d be unable to pay for my keep. There’s also the TB sanatorium, which brings in a small annual sum. But I’m not so sure the climate suits me. My sister, who lives in the mountains behind Nice, is always trying to get me to go and live with her.’

He lived in a pink house at the corner of the square, near the church. He did a bit of dispensing on the side. One hardly ever saw him, since he spent most of his time dozing in his garden under a fig tree.

Two weeks later, with summer already beginning, Hélène asked him:

‘Do you really mean for us to go to Porquerolles? It’s just that I need to know, because of getting the children’s clothes ready.’

‘Yes, we’re going.’

‘Should Marie come too?’

He didn’t care. He wrote off to Paris to get a locum for the month of August. This turned out to be a timid young man who looked at the large grey house where he was going to live all alone with something like fear. They decided to leave Marie with him.

There was still the car to be put right and a telegram to be sent to Madame Harmoniaux, who had reserved their room for them.

The morning of their departure, when everyone was in the car, its roof covered with suitcases fixed on with ropes and straps, he turned back to look at the house. It was very hot that day. You could almost imagine slight steam rising from the grey stones.

The doctor remembered another departure, that of his mother, who had turned around like him just as she was about to get into the ambulance. He

had seen in her eyes a farewell, but a farewell full of sorrow.

She knew she would never come back. She had taken all the necessary steps as a result. She had thought of everything.

And he was going off in a cheerful mood, without any sorrow or remorse, just a slight awkwardness, like a man who knows he is at fault.

And yet he too had the feeling he would never come back. He hadn't known anything of this the day before, or even when he was tying the luggage on to the roof of the car.

It was a sudden sensation. He looked at the walls, the gate, the clipped box trees, and without any transition, it all slipped irrevocably away from him. There was nothing there but an ordinary kind of house, slightly forbidding, with an unknown young replacement doctor standing on the steps and waving goodbye and a fat servant girl at the kitchen window.

It was over! Finished! Well, too bad. He didn't know how things would turn out, but he trusted his presentiment.

He slammed the driver's door, put his foot down and changed gear. The houses on both sides of the road disappeared one after another, swallowed up by the past.

'Aren't we going to say goodbye to the Péchades?'

He'd almost forgotten them. Poor old Péchade! He would have to remain in harness in spite of everything, going through the motions to the bitter end. But it didn't alter the fact that Péchade too was already part of the past.

His friend was wearing a grey suit. His skin looked greyish as well. He came out of his surgery, where he had been giving someone an injection, still holding the syringe in his hand.

'Away for a month, then?' he called.

Madame Péchade was there too, pink-cheeked and rosy, with two of the boys.

'Bon voyage! Do write!'

'Of course.'

Just at that moment, and only at that very moment, his hand on the steering wheel began to tremble. It was a kind of panic, almost animal, a feeling of loss, at the exact moment that something solid was falling away,

something which after a few turns of the wheel no longer existed, but had melted behind them in the sun.

And now the white and red milestones sped past, new names, different numbers. He was alone in the front, since his wife had preferred to sit with the children in the back. Alongside him on the seat was his hat, still bearing a black mourning band.

‘Where do you want to stop for lunch?’

She thought he hadn’t heard, leaned forward to repeat the question, but he just made a vague gesture.

‘François, don’t drive so fast, you know it frightens me.’

He could see her colourless face in the rear mirror and couldn’t stop himself from smiling, a smile that was almost evil.

What would she have said, dear God, if she knew where he was taking her at top speed?



## 7. The Visit to the Ramparts

The building, on the left-hand side of a street running steeply uphill, looked like a barracks, or rather, with its pale green, unornamented façade, like a child's drawing of a house. The resemblance was all the more striking since in the afternoon it was on the shady side of the street, and all its open windows were black holes, as if cut out of paper.

The doctor had had some difficulty finding it. He had scarcely finished lunch at the Pension Saint-Charles than he was racing down to catch the *Cormoran's* one-thirty sailing. At La Tour-Fondue, he had just time to note that the battery of his car was flat before jumping on the bus for Hyères, which was on the point of leaving.

There were only five or six passengers in the vehicle, which bowled along belching oil in the blazing sun and heat. They were mainly island women, shopping for food. Polyte was on board too: canvas trousers, espadrilles, no jacket, and his naval cap on his head. They could hardly carry on a conversation, because of the racket from the engine. The doctor gathered, however, that Polyte was going to Toulon, and he saw him, when they reached a crossroads, leap from the bus to catch another one.

Hyères, when they reached it, seemed dead, emptied of its inhabitants. The sun was striking down directly, and in the wide avenues of the lower town, around the casinos and cinemas, there were only ragged scraps of shade around the plane trees. The pavements were as deserted as at three in

the morning. What gave the place a strange aspect was that all the front doors stood open, with bead or bamboo curtains hanging in front of them, or sometimes simply shabby strips of muslin, hardly moving in the still air.

On one side of each street, the shutters were closed, but on the other, since the sun had left it, the windows were wide open.

The people were all indoors, of course. They had to be somewhere. And although nothing separated the street from the interiors of the houses, there was not a soul to be seen: just the odd dog, lying on a doorstep, interrupting its dreams now and then to have a furious scratch.

He had gathered where it was:

‘Up on the ramparts, two houses down from the whorehouse ...’

He had looked everywhere for some ramparts surrounding the town, but had been unable to locate any. Perhaps they had once existed, and the name had remained? Because of the brothel, he felt awkward about asking the way. And in any case, he had walked for hundreds of metres through the streets without meeting a living creature, accompanying his tiny shadow, which sometimes changed sides, and breathing in the strong smell of melting asphalt.

It was by chance that he found himself in a square lined with artisans’ shops where, on a wall at the far end, he finally spotted the sign ‘rue des Remparts’.

It was on the edge of town. The street was very steep. The first buildings were workshops or sheds, sometimes with a large double door, through which you could see a building site or waste ground.

He started by walking past the house; then he saw, right on the pavement, three women lying on mats on the ground, three women in kimonos taking their siesta. The door and downstairs windows behind them gave a glimpse of café tables and a large pianola, decorated with a profusion of chrome and mother-of-pearl.

One of the women raised herself on her elbow and looked at him. So, out of embarrassment, he continued to walk up the hill. But there were no more houses. It stopped being a street, and had turned into a simple country road

with hedges on both sides, small allotments, and then fifty or a hundred metres further on, nothing but a sort of mound covered with weeds.

He hadn't got a plan. He had arrived at Hyères without anything firm in mind. He had been wrong not to dress like Polyte – instead having encased himself in a wing-collar, tie and formal jacket. It made him conspicuous. He was sweating.

He went back down the hill, passing the three women again, and the one who had seen him before made a gesture of invitation which he pretended not to see.

He hurried down the length of the street, but not without taking in the large green façade, and as he went past, he glimpsed a wide shady entrance hall and a broad staircase with iron bannisters.

This was where Elisabeth lived. She had left Porquerolles with her brother and sister. He had gathered as much, as soon as he had seen her army hut from a distance, its door now open on to an empty room, empty of life and simply cluttered with old fishing tackle and random junk.

He had already gathered as much before he even went up there, from Frans's appearance: his shirt and trousers were in tatters.

In the past, Frans had shaved fairly regularly. Almost always, his cheeks had been smooth. But now they were covered with half an inch of reddish stubble. The previous evening, a little way from the harbour and not far from the rubbish dump, the doctor had seen him crouching in front of a home-made fire, cooking fish in a pan.

He had used naïve stratagems to raise with the boules players a subject which made him blush foolishly.

'Elisabeth? Oh she's away! That's one little miss who knows what she wants. If you were to meet her in Hyères now, you wouldn't recognize her.'

The nuns had taught her to sew, and she had apparently become an excellent linen- and laundrywoman. Her brother was increasingly in the good books of the musician who lived in a villa in Hyères and was taking charge of his education.

One fine day, she had left, taking her little sister, who was about ten years old, with her.

‘She never comes back to Porquerolles. She has too much work over there. Frans agreed to it. He goes to see them now and then, about once a month. You can tell, because he starts by washing out his trousers and drying them on the harbour wall! He has a shave, he borrows some shoes from one of the fishermen. Seems that in Hyères, he always buys some sweets before he goes up to see them. But then afterwards, off he goes to Toulon, knocking it back like nobody’s business ...’

What reason could the doctor have for turning up on their doorstep? If only those women from the brothel weren’t lying on the pavement! He had never seen that anywhere before. No one here seemed offended by it. He went back up the street, and without warning, about twenty metres before reaching the women, he slipped quickly inside the entrance hall of the house. His heart was pounding. He only had a few seconds to invent some excuse.

The floor was grey. All the doors stood open, most of them with bead or muslin curtains. He had the feeling that invisible eyes were spying on him from behind those curtains, and not knowing which door to try, he went awkwardly up the stairs.

The building seemed to have several households living there. The first-floor landing was bigger than a room and cluttered with a pram, a washtub and a few toys. He approached an uncurtained door, coughed and knocked discreetly.

Someone moved inside, a cane chair creaked, he could see a red geranium on a windowsill and a bird in a cage; finally a little old man appeared, walking with a stick, a railwayman’s cap on his head. The man stared at him without saying anything, as if he were a ghost, and his eyes, in the half-light, were so vacant that the doctor wondered whether he had chanced upon a madman.

He spoke quietly, because of all the open doors and all the ears listening behind the walls.

‘Excuse me ... I’m looking for Mademoiselle Klamm.’

He had made up his mind that if the old man did not understand, he would not insist and would go away. But he insisted anyway:

‘Mademoiselle Elisabeth ...’

The old man was thinking. He hadn’t understood. Ah, yes he had! A word had struck him, because he was knotting his brow, and finally pointed at the ceiling over their heads. He was even capable of speech. He said in a cracked voice:

‘I’ll show you.’

But seeing him so decrepit, leaning on his stick, the doctor was afraid, foreseeing some ridiculous scene in the corridor or on the stairs.

‘I’ll find it myself. Sorry to have troubled you.’

He climbed quickly to the second floor, and the old man remained standing in his doorway. If it was the room directly above ...

He knocked at a closed door. A very young voice said:

‘Come in.’

He was red in the face. He had never felt so awkward in his whole life. He found himself in a large room, one which, later, was to grow larger and larger in his memory. In this huge space, her back to the window, a little girl was sitting at the table, turning the pages of a book.

He hadn’t recognized her at first and stammered:

‘Mademoiselle Klammm?’

‘Yes, that’s here.’

The little girl slipped off her chair, closing the book, which looked like a school prize, with its red cover and gilt-edged pages.

She was clean, well turned out, with a red and white gingham smock over her dress. She showed no fear of him. He wondered whether she recognized him. But that wasn’t possible.

‘You wanted to see Elisabeth perhaps?’

‘Your sister, yes.’

‘She’s just gone to deliver some work. If you want to wait.’

Like a well-brought-up little person, she offered him a chair, and not knowing what to do, he sat on it, his hat on his knees. In front of him he could see the closed shutters of the house opposite. Perhaps someone was spying on him through the cracks? People must have heard him coming up



here. The whole house knew he was in this room, like an enormous ogre, with a little girl in a gingham smock.

She felt no need to make conversation. Standing two metres from him, she was looking at him with curiosity from head to toe, but still did not appear frightened.

‘Do you know if she will be back soon?’

‘I don’t know.’

A doorway led to another room, smaller probably, but it was not possible to see inside, as the door was only slightly ajar.

In the room he was in, there was a big table covered with an oilcloth and two beds, one of them a child’s cot, for the little girl presumably; Madeleine, her name was, the doctor remembered it now.

What struck him most was the counterpane on the larger of the two beds – Elisabeth’s of course – a white counterpane with a honeycomb weave, exactly like the one on his bed when he was twelve years old. He could see it now, in his bedroom in the country, lit by a slanting ray of sunshine. He could hear his mother’s voice saying, when he flung himself on top of the bed fully dressed:

‘Take the counterpane off, at least!’

Strangely, he had found the same kind of counterpane in Paris, in Madame Chaminade’s boarding house behind the Pantheon. And Madame Chaminade, who was protective of her belongings, and checked every week that no one had kicked the furniture, would repeat to her tenants:

‘Now please, if you go for a nap, take the counterpane off first.’

And here, on Elisabeth’s bed, he was finding the same counterpane a third time. He looked round. He knew that he would never forget the placing of the slightest object. There was a sewing machine by the window, a smaller table with some half-finished pieces of needlework, a gas ring and some sort of chest, evidently second-hand. Everything was clean and polished.

‘I think I’d better come back another time,’ he stammered.

He could stay there no longer, under the curious but friendly gaze of the child. What goes through the head of a little girl of ten? She was about the

same age as his daughter. Jeanne did talk to him. He listened to her. He sometimes smiled at her remarks, but he had never wondered what she was thinking, and nor had she ever stood in front of him, scrutinizing him.

He explained:

‘I was just passing and I thought I might ask if your sister could do some sewing for my wife.’

The child replied, already very self-possessed:

‘I can’t say. I know she has a lot of work on her hands.’

‘I’ll come back some other time.’

She went to open the door for him and held out her hand.

It was over. He went away, delivered of a great weight. In a few moments he would be out in the street and would have nothing worse to face than the gaze of one or other of the three lounging women. He had only one fear: that he might meet Elisabeth on the stairs. If she didn’t recognize him – and she probably wouldn’t even look at him – he would go away with head bowed. If she did recognize him ...

He reached the entrance hall, then the pavement, without meeting any obstacle and strode off towards the centre of town. He hadn’t seen her, but it came to the same thing, and was perhaps better anyway.

What would be really marvellous would be to bump into her at the corner of one of the little sloping streets of the old town, where all the houses were shops.

He had some time to wait. The bus did not leave until four o’clock. Here and there in the picturesque alleyways, despite the time of day, a little human activity could be glimpsed. Very simple, very poor, and yet somehow gentle and reassuring, this was not sordid poverty but a kind of poverty that was almost sumptuous. In the sunshine, the rendered walls of the houses glowed golden. They clustered together with unexpected curves and bulges. The shops were so low-built that you could touch their ceilings with your hand, and in some places, you could almost reach up to the windows on the first floor.

Outside a blood-red shop front, with a sawdust-covered floor behind it, sat a butcher. Arms folded and mouth wide open, he was fast asleep on his

chair, a fly perching on his eyelid.

Nearby were piles of Italian cheeses, kegs of anchovies or cod, hams suspended from the ceiling, and all these smells mingled together, flies buzzed, while the water from a fountain ran down the edge of the pavement, gurgling like a running stream.

Yes, he should have dressed like Polyte, in canvas trousers, a cotton shirt and espadrilles, to be free to jump from one bus to another.

He didn't meet her. He would surely not meet her in the old quarter, since if she was handling fine linen, she must work for the rich or the middle classes. It would be on the avenues lined with plane trees, with garden fences and sprinklers on the lawns, that she would be found.

He didn't go there. He was afraid. Afraid above all of the first shock of her gaze. He thought of the counterpane, and saw it again, dazzling white, tidily covering the bed; he saw the little girl with her elbows on the table, turning the pages of her red book with gold edging.

He found himself not far from the bus stop, and went into a bar. Two or three men standing at the counter stopped talking as he approached, and looked at him with curiosity.

They were men like Polyte. They had the same supple bodies, relaxed attitude and the same look on their faces, where you always suspected some irony. The barman too, a thin man in shirtsleeves, was of the same type.

'A pastis?'

One of the men was wearing grey trousers and crocodile-skin shoes, and had his jacket slung casually over his arm. From time to time, he looked outside.

'It's late.'

He was waiting for the bus to Nice. Sometimes cars went past, large ones mostly, with chauffeurs. You could hardly see them, but you heard a kind of breath of air and their wheels on the asphalt.

The road between Nice and Marseille was one long boulevard, in fact. In an hour these men would be in an identical bar at another point on the boulevard, in Saint-Raphael, Cannes or Antibes.

'What did Pierre say?'

‘He’ll find him, all right. No need to worry, if Pierre’s there.’

‘Jules is the one who’ll be having kittens ...’

And they went on staring at him, examining this fat man who was too hot and had landed in their bar like a bumblebee in a glass of beer.

Almost every day, just before the game of boules, while his wife was on Silver Beach with the children – she was a little happier now, since she had made the acquaintance of the wife of a factory-owner from Roubaix – almost every day, at about five o’clock, he would stroll, hands in pockets, over to Dr Lepage’s house.

He didn’t go in through the front entrance, but took the path round the back. Looking over the hedge, he could see that his colleague was there, slumped in his deckchair under the fig tree, doing nothing, eyes closed, or staring up at the blue sky.

‘Hope I’m not disturbing you,’ he called.

And immediately afterwards came the squeak of the gate.

‘Take a pew.’

‘It’s not worth it, the game will be starting soon.’

Because now, every evening, he played boules with the locals, including Gène, Polyte, the Cabrini brothers and the rest of them. They would wait for him, and come to look for him if he was late.

‘Hey doctor! Time to get on with it.’

And he would fetch his boules from his pigeonhole at Maurice’s bar. He played with care, tongue between his teeth, and watched the others take their turns, frowning as he tried to discover how they did it.

Dr Lepage’s garden was very small, but you could hardly tell, since it was a real jungle of plants of every kind. There were also flowers growing in glazed bowls, which tripped you over all the time. It contained a well where his maid came to draw water and its creaking was already a familiar sound to Dr Mahé.

‘Nice day ...’

‘You’ve been to Hyères?’

‘Yes, I went for a walk in the old town, it’s extraordinary.’

They didn't have anything to say to each other. Neither of them was fooled. Mahé knew that Lepage was cunning. Possibly even more cunning and determined than a horse dealer in Saint-Hilaire! He never mentioned his wish to leave the island these days, and if you asked after his health, he assumed an indifferent or even surprised expression.

'I'm fine, just fine.'

So fine that he looked like a lamp about to go out. His skin had become colourless, like his faded blond hair. He coughed from time to time, then put his handkerchief in his pocket, muttering:

'It's nothing.'

He must have stuffed himself with creosote, since he gave off waves of it, and the whole house was full of the smell.

It was an old house, and inconvenient. From the garden, you went down two steps to the kitchen with its red floor tiles. The whitewashed walls had not been cleaned for years. The range wasn't used, but there were two charcoal stoves and a gas ring attached to a butane bottle. The place was run-down. And dirty. But Dr Mahé always found some excuse to go inside, charmed as he was by the rosy reflections on the tiles and the constant buzzing of flies. Cool water was kept in a large earthenware jar and he would go and ask for a glass from the maid, who, for no particular reason, had taken a dislike to him.

He had seen some of the other rooms. But not the bedrooms, since his colleague had never invited him upstairs.

Whatever the hour of day, the house was always in semi-darkness, and when you came in from outside you had to feel your way until your eyes had time to grow accustomed to the dim light. He had never seen the shutters open.

In one corner was the narrow room which served as the pharmacy, with an old counter, painted black, a few chipped earthenware pots, some bottles on shelves, boxes of medicaments and, on the floor, some demijohns and trial samples of medicines still in their half-opened boxes.

Next door, the surgery was equally shabby, with its chipped enamel instruments, rubber tubing and consultation couch, covered with a worn

oilcloth of indeterminate colour.

There was a sitting room too. The doctor had only been able to glimpse it. There was a bed in the room. Did Lepage sleep there?

Every evening, or near enough, he came sniffing around and sat for a moment or two in the garden. Every evening, he was on the point of saying: 'So when will you pass this practice over to me?'

Elisabeth was in Hyères, but that didn't alter his plans.

Hélène, unsuspecting, was still living on the island like an outsider, like the other boarders at Madame Harmoniaux's guesthouse. She had got used to it in the end, in the sense that the island was now simply a background that she scarcely noticed any more.

She would get up every morning, dress the children and come down for breakfast in the bright, sunlit dining room. Her sewing bag was ready, along with the children's toys, to go to the beach. She walked slowly, turning round and waiting for her new friend from Roubaix, who would soon join her.

She had never dreamed of putting on a bathing costume, still less of going for a swim.

Usually, because of the glare from the sea, which hurt her eyes, she would sit with her back to it. And in any case, she hardly ever looked up from her work.

She wrote to her sisters, to Madame Péchade, and to anyone else back home whose news she thought she should report to her husband.

'Listen, François, little Madame Bailleux is expecting again. And yet her husband knows very well she has one miscarriage after another ...'

He paid no attention. He watched the *Cormoran* arriving every morning, then he read the newspaper on the terrace outside Maurice's bar, with a glass of white wine. He looked across at Lepage's house, and the small building, like the narrow streets of old Hyères, grew bigger in his eyes.

He took a turn round the harbour, reddening with pleasure when people spoke familiarly to him:

'Hey doctor, since you're not busy, perhaps you can give me a hand folding this net?'

The odd thing was that he dared not address a word to Frans, although he often found himself very near him. Had the ex-legionnaire not noticed him?

He progressed through the days like one walking through warm sand, with the feeling he was sinking in, and at five o'clock, his head already heavy, he would go into his colleague's garden, knowing that he hadn't yet made up his mind to speak to him.

It was extraordinary how many scenarios he had constructed like this, under the hot sun, each more extravagant than the last. He had gone so far as to imagine an accident. For instance, he could break his leg. He wouldn't be able to leave the island at the end of their holiday. Because of school, his wife and children would return to Saint-Hilaire. That way, he would have some time in front of him.

But what then?

Blushing to himself, he thought of another possibility, but even more ridiculous, and what was more, distasteful. Everyone, since his mother's death, had agreed that he had been greatly affected, and the words 'nervous trouble' had been pronounced. Why not write to Péchade, and ask him for a favour. Péchade would come to see him, pretexting a few days break (he would, of course, reimburse him for the journey). It would not be hard to persuade Hélène that her husband should not go back to Saint-Hilaire yet, that his rest-cure needed much more time.

He felt cross with himself, and inwardly begged his mother's pardon for making use of her in this underhand way, even in thought.

Then he shook himself angrily. What need did he have to explain himself anyway? Wasn't he free to lead his life as he wished?

Yes, of course. In different circumstances, it would have been easy. For instance, if he had been ambitious, and if he had dreamed of setting up in practice in a town somewhere, or a city even.

Hélène would have had just as much trouble getting used to it, but he wouldn't have felt in the least awkward saying:

'I don't want to stay in Saint-Hilaire all my life ... I need a larger practice, and a better income.'





He'd played his shot. He stood waiting, his second boule in his hand. The aftertaste of the pastis still made him feel a little queasy. He drank it without quite knowing why, because it had the colour and the smell of the south.

He had put on weight. Under his leather belt, his belly was a bulging mass.

'Go on, Gène!'

And Gène took a long time to aim, holding a pose that suggested he was about to take flight. He leaped forward, took three flying steps and the boule arced through the air to hit the opponent's ball. After which, he turned aside, with a false air of indifference, like a man to whom it all comes easily.

'Your turn, doctor.'

Suddenly, he was sorry he hadn't waited for Elisabeth. Now it would be much harder to go back there. What would he say? Or else, he'd really have to bring her some sewing work. But Hélène saw to all their linen herself.

He felt hot. He kept on searching, with furrowed brow, and the sickening thing was that he didn't know exactly what he was searching for with such determination.

Suddenly he remembered something Gène had said, about Dr Lepage, who spent most of his days lounging in his garden. Gène had said:

'That man there, I'll tell you what it is about him. He's tired of being in his skin!'



## 8. Victory to the Péquois

‘Do you realize, François, that we’re going home the day after tomorrow?’ his wife had said to him over lunch.

They had been served mullet, he remembered afterwards, seeing again the red patches on their plates. It was a Wednesday. They were supposed to be leaving on Friday, in order to be back at Saint-Hilaire by Saturday evening. This was the date agreed with his locum, who needed to be away to meet someone in the mountains.

‘It’s as if you’re not giving it any thought ...’

He was making no preparations. Nor had he arranged – despite noticing two weeks earlier that the car’s battery was flat – to have it recharged. When he went to Hyères, he took the bus.

But what was there to prepare? He had not replied to Hélène, who had already sorted out the children’s toys and most of their clothes. Tomorrow, he knew from experience, they would all have on the clothes they would wear to travel.

Did he already know he would not be leaving?

At any rate, he had not yet managed to say anything to Dr Lepage, who was still waiting, dozing in his deckchair.

He had not seen Elisabeth again. Or rather, and this was quite frightening, he wasn’t *sure* he had seen her. He had been back to Hyères three times, the first time one morning, when the sun was shining on her side of the street

and all the shutters were closed. On that occasion, there were no women on the pavement. He had walked up and down without daring to go in, and he had seen Georges leave the house and set off to the town, his violin under his arm. He had become a skinny adolescent, with bright eyes and flaring nostrils.

Another time, at the bottom of the street, he had met little Madeleine, clutching some money in her fist, and going into a grocer's shop. She had recognized him, with some surprise, no doubt wondering why, since Elisabeth was at home, he was not going up to see her.

But he had not dared do that, precisely because he knew she would be alone in that big room, with the cool air circulating. Perhaps, to tell the truth, he wasn't really coming to Hyères to see her after all?

The third time, he had been getting off the bus when he gave a start. A young girl was walking along past the houses with precise steps. She was wearing a dark blue dress and a little straw hat, also navy blue, on her golden hair. He could only glimpse a part-profile. He had a feeling, rather than a certainty, that it was her. To make sure, he would only have to walk on quickly for about a hundred metres go past her, then stop to look in a shop window, or turn back. He thought about it, but stayed where he was, on the pavement. She turned a corner. He hurried forward, then thought better of it, and stopped at a little bar where he had already become a regular.

The following night, however, he had had *that* dream. It was something very special. He would never have dared tell anyone about it, for fear of being laughed at. First of all, he had to put himself in the right frame of mind the evening before – 'a state of grace', he called it. In order to do that, he drank rather more than on the other days, until his thoughts had become vague and soft, almost dream-like already.

Lying on his right side, he would conjure up a certain number of images in a certain order, and drop off to sleep. But as a rule, the dream didn't come, and he would wake in the morning disappointed. Other times, the dream began, he felt it beginning, he helped it with all his might, and then woke up suddenly, seeing the shining slats of the shutters in front of him.

This time, he had managed to dream the whole thing. It was a morning, the morning after Alfred's visit to the army hut. He was walking across the square, without meeting anyone. There was no one on the quayside either. It must be very early, because the island was drained of colour, and had the freshness of daybreak.

He walked up the steep path and saw the open door – open because he was expected; he went in, he knew she was there, and that she was alone. She watched him approach with a sad smile on her lips, sad, but not bitter or angry. She was wearing the red dress, which was now too short for her.

Then his heart would leap up, and he would say:

'I've come ...'

Elisabeth's smile became more luminous. Quite naturally, she allowed herself to be enfolded in his arms, and nestled there as if it was her natural refuge.

He added:

'It had to be. I loved you too much.'

She would reply. He knew the words she would utter:

'Yes, I knew that ...'

But curiously, he couldn't hear the sound of her voice.

'Now I have come to take you away for ever.'

That was the end. Or rather, something inexpressible happened. They didn't really go away, in the sense that they were not *going* anywhere; he couldn't see the landscape changing, for instance. Their departure, much more extraordinary than a real-life departure, was marked by an internal movement, a leap, so that at that moment, knowing the dream had ended, he would wake up, exhausted by a superhuman effort.

He had had another dream, the same night, before or after the Elisabeth dream, he couldn't remember which. It was because of this other dream that he still felt as if there was an iron band around his brow. It was hard to say where it was taking place. He was in a public square. Rather like the playground of the school he had attended as a child, or the market-place of Saint-Hilaire.

He was standing up, and he needed to leave, he knew there were pressing reasons why he should leave. But there were people milling around him, just as, some evenings, tourists crowded around the boules players in the square at Porquerolles. The difference was that these people were looking stern, ‘impenetrable’ – the word occurred in his dream – and they formed a perfect circle, as if for some kind of game that he couldn’t remember.

Was the point of the game to stop him escaping from the circle? He wondered if this was it, knitting his brows. He looked at their serious expressions, hoping all the time that they would smile, that perhaps they would all burst out laughing at the good joke they had played on him.

He knew them. Certain faces were very familiar to him, aunts, uncles, cousins of both sexes, all members of the large Mahé family. Others were almost strangers to him, but he did know that they too were Mahés, the ones from all the shop fronts and businesses where his name was written up.

He didn’t want to be a bad sport. He smiled as he approached the ones who looked the least threatening, and murmured as he tried to push through:

‘Excuse me ...’

Nobody moved. They were like statues. And he went round the circle. He was sweating with anxiety. He knew that he absolutely had to get out urgently, minutes counted. He went red in the face and became really angry.

‘Do you think this is clever? Are you going to let me through, yes or no? You know it is absolutely *imperative* that ...’

And suddenly it was no longer men and women who surrounded him, but tombstones standing in a circle, and yet these stones were recognizable, they still bore the features of the persons they represented.

Now he was no longer dreaming. He had spent an exhausting day, pursued by first one then the other of his two dreams. He was crossing the square, and as he approached the doctor’s house he slowed down, sensing that his legs were getting heavier. He reached the fence, and felt a mixture of hope and disappointment as he saw that the deckchair under the fig tree was empty. He pushed the gate. The maid called out:

‘The doctor is in his surgery.’

‘Is there someone with him?’

‘No, he’s been working all day ... Go on in.’

If she hadn’t said that, he wouldn’t have gone in, but he dared not disobey the instruction. He went along the brown corridor, and knocked at a dark door.

‘Come in, doctor.’

He wasn’t dreaming now, that was sure. It was five in the afternoon. He was wide awake, in possession of all his faculties, but it felt like a dream, seeing little Dr Lepage, a pale face in the half-light of his surgery, motioning him to a chair without getting up himself.

‘I’ve come to have a serious talk with you,’ he blurted out, to get it off his chest. ‘Four years ago, yes four years ago, you told me one day that you would be going to live with your sister, in the Alps, near Nice I believe ...’

The other man made a vague gesture as if to say that didn’t signify greatly, or that he wasn’t particularly intent on it.

‘I might be willing to take over your practice.’

It was at that point that it really became a dream. Because on the desk were scattered sheets of paper, covered with careful handwriting, with a column for figures and footnotes at the bottom of the pages.

‘I was expecting this,’ Dr Lepage was saying, in a voice at once silky and icy. ‘So much so that I’ve spent all day drawing up an inventory.’

Dr Mahé failed to understand.

‘I knew you would say something today or tomorrow, since you are supposed to be leaving on Friday. So to save some time ...’

Mahé reddened. He had the feeling his free will had just been stolen from him and that, for weeks now, he had been deceived. Because for weeks, Lepage, sitting in his deckchair, had been following the progress of his obsession, and had worked out a diagnosis so precise that on the relevant day – not the one before or the one after – he had sat down to work.

He should have left immediately, with a shrug of his shoulders. He would have given anything to be able to do so. Instead of which, he murmured:

‘Inventory? Of what?’

‘If I go to live with my sister, which is quite likely if we can come to an agreement, I won’t be needing the furniture, or anything else in the house.

And you know as well as I do that a public auction is always a disaster.'

If his mother had been there, how quickly she would have put this pale-faced little doctor in his place! Because she was a sharp businesswoman. But Mahé knew he was about to be cheated, that a shameless act was being played out for his benefit, yet he didn't have the courage to protest.

'So I was anxious, whenever you made up your mind to speak to me, as you just have, to be able to give you a figure, then we could come to terms at once. I get very easily tired, as you know, and arguments particularly exhaust me. That's why I'm somewhat reluctant to go to my sister, who is a difficult woman, and who seems to enjoy getting on my nerves. So if you're not sure about it ...'

Like a horse trader at a fair, he was threatening to let the whole deal go up in smoke, and his hand reached out to pull together the papers on the table.

'Yes, I've made up my mind.'

'Have you spoken to Madame Mahé?'

'My wife will agree to it.'

And to think that with one blow from his massive fists he could have crushed this livid-faced, diabolical little man!

'Well, there are several things to consider. First, the purchase of the patients in the practice.'

'I thought there were hardly any ...'

'I may have said that ... I didn't want a rival settling here.'

'With only four hundred residents ...'

'In winter, yes! You are forgetting that in the summer, we have one of the best clienteles in France, and there are always fresh arrivals ...'

Mahé tried again:

'... who are not ill.'

'Well, if it's like that,' Dr Lepage said sharply, ready to close the discussion right there.

'I'm sorry to be raising objections ... You were saying, the price of the practice?'

The other man quoted a figure so enormous that Mahé should have stood up and left immediately.

‘And then there’s the house, and just last year, I was offered ...’

He named an equally ridiculous figure. He was asking for this little place double the value of the large comfortable house in Saint-Hilaire!

‘Don’t forget that land is scarce on the island, because most of it is owned by the military. Then there is the furniture and other moveable items, and I’ve drawn up three copies of the list, with the values marked. I can, of course, go round the rooms with you and ...’

Dr Mahé already had one of the lists in his hand, and was looking at it with stupefaction. If he had been dreaming, no doubt all those Mahés from last night would have burst out laughing, or ground their teeth. Who knows whether the circle wouldn’t have pressed inwards on to him to stifle him?

He allowed himself to be led through the gloomy rooms, where his colleague pointed out here an old armchair, there a worn carpet, an amateur watercolour, all of it valued at ludicrously inflated prices.

He imagined Hélène walking in here, sniffing and looking at him incredulously. She wouldn’t be able to believe her ears. All the less when she found out that even if they got a good sum for the Saint-Hilaire house and most of its contents, he would still have to cash in some shares and holdings his mother had left him in order to put up enough money.

‘You *are* leaving, the day after tomorrow?’

He said no. He wasn’t sure. He felt literally nauseated. This inventory being forced upon him, an interminable and minutely detailed catalogue, made him sick to his stomach. He could smell the dust, the old odours enclosed for years inside cupboards and bedrooms.

There was even a cracked chamber pot listed in the inventory.

‘I suppose you can pay cash, at least for three-quarters of the sum?’

No, he couldn’t. He would have to arrange matters. While waiting to be able to sell his house, which would take time, he’d take out a mortgage. The family solicitor wouldn’t believe his ears either.

So why didn’t he just walk away? Why was he following, like a docile schoolboy, behind his bloodless and sarcastic guide?



‘I’m sure you’ll be very happy here, and that Madame Mahé will soon feel quite at home.’

He couldn’t be serious. And yet he wasn’t smiling. Polyte’s voice came from the square, calling him:

‘Doctor, are you coming? ... Ready for the game now.’

‘I think they’re waiting for you. You are already popular on the island – that’s an advantage. They’ve never really taken to me ... If you like, before your game, we could sign a promise of sale ...’

‘That might take too long ...’

They returned to the surgery. Two sheets of paper were ready, and Mahé felt between his fingers a wretched cheap penholder, sticky with purple ink.

‘Here ... look ... and here. We can look into the details tomorrow. Take your copy with you. I won’t offer you an aperitif, if you don’t mind ... As I never have one, I’m not sure there’s anything in the house.’

‘Thank you. They’re waiting for me.’

He had to shake that clammy hand, and when he found himself outside, he felt as though he was emerging from another world, his eyes clouded, his gait unsteady.

‘Your turn now, doctor. You’re with Gène and Bastou. Cabrini sent up the first ball, but you’ll be able to deal with him.’

During the whole of the game, he felt he was being mocked. He could see irony in every expression. He ended up wondering whether the entire island was in on the trick that had been played on him.

Who knows, perhaps since the first time he had stepped off the boat ... Four years ago now. He had been struggling for four years ... Or rather no, it wasn’t true. On the contrary he had wallowed in his pain. He had known that sooner or later it would end in disaster.

But why think it a disaster? He looked round at the square, seeing it with different eyes from the past. He was part of it now. All he would have to do in future was open the front door, in slippers or espadrilles, and walk along, his skin still damp with sweat, to await the arrival of the *Cormoran*, then sit

on Maurice's terrace for the first glass of white wine of the day, reading the paper and chatting with one of the fishermen.

The Mahés could just take a running jump! What had they brought him up to do? Nothing. They had truly fixed a circle of stone round him, just like in his dream. You will marry Hélène, because she's mild and docile. You'll father a couple of children with her. You'll do your rounds on a motorbike to save petrol. You'll be a country doctor all your life, and your house will be well cared for.

They would have held it against him if he had tried to rise even a little higher above his station. So why should they forbid him to go *down* in the world, if he wasn't happy where he had been placed?

'You're not playing too well today, doctor!'

Was he even aware of playing a game at all? He went to pick up his boules. He waited for his turn. He would have all the time in the world to perfect his game now.

Since his team had lost, he paid for two rounds of drinks, one more than was necessary.

'Are you going to go fishing tomorrow morning?'

He looked across at Gène, who had asked the question, and gave a start, as if these words had awoken something in his subconscious.

'I'm not sure,' he said in a neutral voice.

'Well, if you do, there are some *piades* ready in the bucket.'

He had an arrangement with Gène nowadays that he could use his boat, which he had learned to manage.

The bell was ringing for supper at the Pension Saint-Charles. His wife and children were already at table. He looked at them for a long time, astonished to see them there, the children getting so big, his wife so uncomplaining.

'I've written to Péchade,' she said, as they ate.

Why? He had no idea. He couldn't see the connection. He didn't have the heart to ask her.

After supper, he went for a walk along the jetty. There were hardly any yachts by now. In a few days, the holidays would be over, and the island

would return to its quiet winter state. He went for a drink. Not too many, two or three. He shook a number of hands.

At last he went to bed, and passed the night tossing and turning. As he slept fitfully, with flashes of consciousness, he was aware of heaving himself on to his side and rolling over on the mattress. The air was cooler now. He wondered whether he might be catching cold.

Very early next morning, as the first birds were singing in the tamarisks on the roadside, he lay on his back, eyes wide open, feeling very calm, almost eerily calm. He stayed like that for a quarter of an hour, then got up quietly, pulled on his trousers and the old fishing jacket, combed his hair quickly and tiptoed out, without bothering to shave.

Jojo was washing the tiled floor of the Arche de Noé, with the doors wide open. He went in and ordered a glass of white wine.

‘You’re going fishing?’

He said yes, and went out without paying. Now that he was a regular customer, his drinks were marked up on the slate behind the door.

Gène’s boat was sparkling with drops of dew, but he knew there was a cloth stowed away below. The air was cool. The fishermen were leaving port.

He went through the ritual gestures, filled the tank, made sure the plugs were clean, and lifted up the basket of hermit crabs soaking in water, then finally went up on the jetty to loosen the moorings.

He did all this with minute care. For a moment, once he had the engine running, he glanced at the square, to make sure Gène wasn’t coming to join him at the last minute. In fact, as they learned later, Gène arrived at the harbour just after the boat had rounded the jetty, heading straight for the Mèdes.

The engine turned over sweetly, the water bubbled and sparkled behind the boat with its blue gunnel. Sea and sky met each other in the same fresh iridescent green. The fishermen’s boats, which had a good start and more powerful engines, were already nearing the two white rocks which marked the far end of the island.

The doctor stopped the engine near the larger of the rocks, the one where he had been fishing that first day with Gène. He dropped a heavy stone attached to a rope to act as an anchor. He scattered a few *piades* on the seat, and looked for the hammer and the *boulantins*.

Twice he turned round to look at Notre-Dame Beach, where his wife and children with Mariette had been sitting that first day.

Slowly, he lowered a hand-held line into the water and leaned across the coping. The sea was still as crystal clear as ever. He recognized the underwater scene where fish were swimming, some white, others with black stripes: seabream. And he remembered the business with the *péquois*. Very far off, at the end of the jetty, a small rowing-boat, setting off for a morning's fishing for tiddlers, came into view: the large straw hat belonged to old Monsieur Forgeard, a retired lawyer who lived on the island all year round.

His hand automatically gave little jerks on the line, and the first fish he pulled up was – indeed – a *péquois*. He looked at it with an odd smile, before dropping it into the bottom of the boat, under a damp towel. Then he let the line down again.

He leaned over the side once more. Some black shapes, longer and swifter, could be seen among the pale fish. He remembered the Admiral's conger eel.

He had left his straw hat in the front of the boat. The sun was beating down on his skull. An invisible swell, which he had not previously noticed, began to lift the boat at an infinitely slow rhythm, and at the same time, his line caught on the seabed and he leaned further over.

That was all he ever knew. He was standing up, leaning over and looking at the bottom. His head was swimming, perhaps because of the early morning, the bad night he had passed, the wine or the sun, which was already hot.

It seemed to him that thousands of golden sequins covered the surface of the water, and golden needles were piercing his eyes.

He swayed to and fro. He was being pulled forward. And yet he knew perfectly well that he could react, it only needed a little effort.

The movement had something restful and voluptuous about it, the water was coming nearer, and the seabed with its avenues of seaweed and glutinous mountains.

Everyone would think it was an accident. Perhaps it was?

In the split second that it took to be swallowed up by the coolness of the sea, he asked himself the question.

Was it just that question? It wasn't *a* question, it was *the* question, the only one. His eyes widened and asked it, innocently, of the immensity around him, and he still received no answer.

The salt water penetrated him, he could see the bottom of the sea very close, as if through a huge magnifying glass, then he came back to the surface, went down again, and his arms pushed away the disapproving circle of the Mahés; he needed, he could feel it at last, to go deeper, to reach the red dress, there were moments when he was on the point of touching it.

Elisabeth was looking at him, pale-faced and with astonished eyes: perhaps she was wondering what had taken him so long?

He was coming, just a little more effort. The Mahés didn't understand, they would never understand. He himself hadn't understood, it was only now that he could begin to glimpse the truth.

It was a love story. And then there was another truth, even more luminous, a grand passion in which ...

But when he reached that truth, when he was absorbed into it like a bubble of air, his human life was over and he could no longer pass on the message.

They found Gène's boat, capsized, with the straw hat floating alongside. It wasn't until the evening that a boathook pulled in the body, over a mile away, near the harbour mouth, where it had floated of itself, between two tides.

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